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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

薔薇の花かんむり

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 29

Crown of Roses

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... Such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

A single rosary bead.

Pulled in by the fingers as a prayer is offered up.

Maria-sama. Please watch over us and ensure that we act properly at all times.

And then, a single rose blooms.

Maria-sama. Please guide us when we have lost our way.

One more.

The petals from the rose form a crown.

Maria-sama.

Please accept this crown made by my prayers.

Onee-sama, Rosary and Petite Sœur

Part 1.

In the middle of winter, a mere 30 minute difference in morning bus departure time meant a world of difference in ambient temperature.

You could say that this was obvious, since the sun would have had less time to warm the Tokyo atmosphere, but as she rode the bus that looped between the north gate of M station and Lillian's Girls Academy she couldn't dismiss it so simply.

She had thought it worthwhile checking if the bus that left at 7:30 was the same as the one that left right on 8:00. The peak-time for middle-school and high-school students heading to school was around 8:00am, so the bus was usually loaded to 200% capacity with students packed in tight and hanging on to overhead straps or handrails. Naturally, the heat was incredible. On days when you were carried through to the general vicinity of one of the heating ducts it was so steamy that you wanted to take off your muffler and gloves, but there was no room to move, so all you could do was endure until you arrived at the Lillian's Girls Academy bus stop. – That was the scene that usually played out around Yumi on her trip to school these days.

(Oooh, it's cold.)

So then, the only conclusion you could draw for why Yumi was now shaking as she sat in a deserted bus was that she had caught an earlier bus than usual. Even so, there would normally be more students catching this bus, but the one immediately before it had been running late and scooped up all of the students waiting on the platform, which meant that when this bus departed it only had about ten students on-board. It sounded like the heater was turned on, but its rattling did very little to warm the air.

Yumi placed her hand over her chest as she looked out the window. Underneath the layers of her gloves, coat and school uniform was a small weight. The cross that hung from her rosary was listening intently to the rhythmical thudding of her heart.

By following the line of thought that led to her catching an earlier bus, Yumi arrived at this rosary.

(...Today's definitely the day I give this to Tōko-chan.)

As a result of that decision she had been assailed by waves of various emotions, including nervousness, excitement and sorrow, to the extent that she opened her eyes an hour earlier than usual this morning. In spite of her exhaustion from their long trip yesterday, Yumi had awoken without the aid of her alarm clock.

And once her eyes were open, there was nothing she could do. At the very least, her emotions made going back to sleep impossible, so Yumi turned the heater on with the remote control then quietly crept out of bed while it was still dark. It seemed a waste to spend the extra time on 'image training,' so she decided to head to school early instead. And when she arrived at M station, Yumi realized that by missing the morning peak she had also avoided various people asking her about how yesterday's date went.

The bus stopped in front of the gates to Lillian's Girls Academy. Ten girls, including Yumi, filed out of the rear doors of the bus, all of them student at Lillian's. Yumi was last off the bus, and as she stepped down, she turned and look inside the bus. The lone middle-aged woman who remained in one of the priority seats looked ill-at-ease.

Of the nine other students who got off the bus with her, none of them seemed to be smiling. Naturally, they recognized her as Rosa Chinensis en bouton, but they just gave a slight nod and then hurried off ahead of her. They all had their reasons why they had to arrive at school early. Yumi saw them off with a smile, then slowly walked after them.

Yumi glided smoothly across the pedestrian bridge, when usually she would have to trudge in order to keep pace with those around her. Of course, there had been days when she had to arrive early as part of her Yamayurikai work, but she'd never arrived at school so early without a meeting or task scheduled. It didn't matter when she arrived at the Rose Mansion today, so the feeling of being rushed was absent.

Yumi spotted a small sprout growing in a corner of the pedestrian bridge. The wind may have carried it there, since it was in a spot where dust had gathered. In spite of how cold the air felt on your skin. The pedestrian bridge was, just a tiny bit, closer to the sun than the ground, and perhaps it had good exposure to sunlight. Spring would soon be here.

As she passed through the tall gates, the number of people Yumi could see walking in front of her increased. Students who caught the bus that looped in the opposite direction blended together with those who walked to school. Sprinkled in amongst these were a few university students and members of the teaching staff, who weren't wearing uniforms.

After walking down the path lined with trees, now stripped back to their branches, the statue of Maria-sama appeared. Normally Yumi was just one in a crowd of people when she passed by here, and was always mindful of the people behind her, but today it looked like she'd be able to take her time.

Oh.

The sole person in front of the statue of Maria-sama was just finishing her prayers as Yumi arrived.

The student turned around slowly, perhaps having sensed Yumi's presence or heard her footsteps. The girl turned around as though in slow-motion, and the instant their eyes met her mouth made the exact same shape as Yumi's.

"Ah."

The two faint sounds overlapped each other, sounding like a voice. The two of them stood facing each other with their mouths agape. But surely that couldn't have lasted for very long. The young lady in front of her quickly put on a smile, as though her momentary surprise had never happened, and said:

“Gokigenyou, Yumi-sama.”

This time around she projected her voice from her diaphragm.

Vertical hair-rolls that swayed beside her ears, a determined brow. First year camellia class, Matsudaira Tōko. Member of the drama club. Yesterday, Yumi's partner on a date. And –

“Thank-you for yesterday.”

As expected. She was someone who was able to act properly even in such circumstances.

“It seems like I caught the bus just ahead of yours. As our bus was leaving, we could see the next one pulling in to the bus stop and all the students on board sighed. Ahh, if only we'd waited for the next one.”

Not only that, but she seemed the same as usual.

“Yep. It was deserted.”

Belatedly, Yumi smiled and walked forward. Then stopped in front of the statue of Maria-sama. Yumi's heart leapt when she passed in front of Tōko-chan, but she took care not to show it. Because it was kind of annoying. It would be embarrassing to be the only one who looked as though they were getting all excited.

But the truth was, Yumi was all excited. Because the face that she had been picturing as she walked along the path had suddenly appeared in front of her. And since she didn't know why this good fortune had befallen her, Yumi couldn't help herself.

When she lowered her hands that had been joined in prayer and turned around, Tōko-chan was still there. So close that Yumi could almost reach out and touch her.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Yumi walked over and stood beside Tōko-chan. The cross hanging from her neck asked if she was sure about this, but Yumi walked alongside Tōko-chan towards the school buildings.

Their chance meeting in front of the statue of Maria-sama may have been a perfect opportunity to give the rosary to Tōko-chan, but Yumi didn't think so.

In order to retrieve the rosary, she would have had to undo the buttons on her school coat.

Would have had to call out to Tōko-chan to stop her from walking away.

People would have noticed. While Yumi was contemplating this, two other students had already walked past them.

But she knew immediately that these were all minor things. There was a bigger reason why she thought that this wasn't the right time.

For instance, if her coat jacket was to come unbuttoned right now, Tōko-chan were to stop walking and she could see that there was no-one else around, it would still be no good.

As they walked, Tōko-chan spoke.

"For some reason I woke up earlier than normal today."

So that was why she had arrived at school somewhat earlier than usual.

"Hmmm."

Despite responding indifferently, Yumi's heart fluttered. It may simply have been a problem with her sleep cycle. But there was also the possibility that Tōko-chan arose early due to excitement.

The pair stopped in front of the entrance to the school building. When they entered inside, they would each go in different directions, first to change into their indoor shoes and then on to their classrooms. If there was something she wanted to say, now was the time.

"Today at lunch-time."

That was probably all Yumi needed to say for the astute Tōko-chan to understand.

“Okay.”

At Tōko-chan’s small nod of assent, Yumi added, ‘In front of the statue of Maria-sama.’

Students were walking around them as they stood there talking. Some students didn’t even look at their faces. Others looked inquisitively at the pair who were the center of so many rumors.

Yumi turned to leave when she was stopped by Tōko-chan saying, ‘Umm.’

“I have something to ask of you.”

Despite the presence of a group of three first years noisily making their way past, Tōko-chan drew close to Yumi and whispered in her ear.

“At that time –”

When she heard what Tōko-chan said, Yumi was surprised. But judging by Tōko-chan’s expression, she hadn’t misheard her.

Tōko-chan had been thinking about the same thing.

Yumi was elated at Tōko-chan’s request, even more than she had been about them both waking up early.

First year camellia class, Matsudaira Tōko.

Member of the drama club.

Yesterday, Yumi’s partner on a date.

– And the girl who would become Yumi’s petite sœur in a few hours time.

Part 2.

Yumi's predictions were confirmed when she opened the door to the second year pine classroom and saw that there were hardly any students inside, and the room seemed colder than usual.

“Gokigenyou.”

Yumi started by greeting the three students who had arrived ahead of her. After that, she walked over to her seat and placed her schoolbag and purse on the table. Then she took off her school coat and gloves, and put them in her locker at the back of the classroom. Yumi then returned to her seat and had just finished taking out the notebooks that she would use for today's classes when she was confounded. Something had gone missing.

“Oh, what's this about, you don't have to go to the Rose Mansion?”

Yumi's classmates were watching her, intrigued, as she remained seated.

“I just felt like coming to school early today, for no real reason.”

Yumi's classmates chuckled at her answer, one of them adding, ‘My, what a luxury.’ When she asked about this, Yumi learned that they all regularly arrived at this hour because of the public transportation near where they lived. If they caught a later bus or train they would risk being tardy, so their only option was to wake up early.

“It must be hard to do that every day.”

As for Yumi, she caught a bus to and from M station. Traffic congestion made it harder to judge when a bus would arrive compared to a train, but thankfully even if she did miss the bus she only had to wait about ten minutes for the next one to arrive.

“Because you do it every day, you get used to it.”

“Right, right. And once you're used to it, it's surprisingly pleasant.”

“You get to skip the morning rush hour.”

All three of the girls spoke. Yumi thought that they were the ones who had the luxury.

“And there are other girls who have club activities or committee meetings that get here even earlier than us.”

That was true. There were a number of desks with a bag on them, but the owner nowhere in sight. Most clubs had canceled their regular morning practices because the ‘Third Years’ Farewell Party’ was drawing near, but some were holding special club activities.

“So what do you usually do during the thirty minutes or so until everyone arrives?”

Yumi bowed her head as she asked. Since they were all experts, they undoubtedly had some brilliant way of making use of the time.

“Nothing much... Right?”

The three girls exchanged glances.

“Around Christmas and Valentines Day we’ll knit, or do something similar. But, these days? We’ll usually just finish off some homework or go over our English vocabulary.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Because we have to wake up early, we also have to go to bed early. And it’s just more efficient to study in the morning.”

“Ohh...”

At least for today, Fukuzawa Yumi had finished all her homework and was fully prepared for class. Naturally, she hadn’t brought along some unfinished knitting either. And she wasn’t such an avid reader that she always carried around a book to read.

“Oooh.”

Yumi thought about the many occasions when she was low on time but desperately wanted some more, but now that she had unexpectedly found herself with some spare time she didn’t know how to use it.

“Yumi-san, you’re really...”

“Looks that way.”

Her three classmates laughed, amazed. They were undoubtedly thinking that she was dull and lacked interests.

“Anyway, if you had some Yamayurikai work to do, you could do that.”

That was true, so Yumi couldn’t really object.

“Or how about going to the Rose Mansion? There’s probably something there to do.”

“Maybe.”

The next Yamayurikai organized event was the ‘Third Years Farewell Party,’ so of course there was work to do. But the Yamayurikai members had decided to co-ordinate when to come in early and stay back late so they could all work together. Even so.

“I’m not sure how well it would go down if I went to the Rose Mansion early and started working by myself.”

“Ahh.”

Since Yoshino-san would be the only one shouting about ‘throwing off the pace’ or ‘breaking a promise’ it would probably be okay, but then Noriko-chan would show up early tomorrow morning to meet Yumi. What was simply a way for her to waste some time would turn into a major drama.

“Really, what I want to do is go and see my onee-sama, but I don’t think she’d be here just yet.”

Yumi flopped down over her desk. The other girls looked surprised.

“Oh, is that so? Sachiko-sama seems like she’s the type of person who would come to school early.”

“She wouldn’t be here this early unless she had something to do.”

Sachiko-sama was no good early in the morning because of her low blood pressure. Especially in winter, when it took quite a while for her body and brain to get in gear.

Even so, it’s not as though she would burst through the school gates rushing to make it on time. Running, and consequently rustling her skirt and tossing her sailor collar, would be such an offense to Sachiko-sama’s sense of dignity that it would rank as one of the most indecent acts she could perform.

While they were chatting, the number of students in the classroom was steadily rising. Then the other three girls left her with a cryptic remark before returning to their respective desks.

“Yumi-san, good luck.”

“Huh?”

Good luck, they said. But what on earth would she need luck for? Before Yumi had a chance to turn around and ask, a new group of students tramped into the classroom.

“Ahh – Yumi-san’s here.”

In the time it took the one person to say that, she had been surrounded by six of her classmates.

(Ah.)

Belatedly, Yumi understood the meaning of the ‘Good luck.’

“Is the rumor about yesterday’s date true?”

“What happened? Your partner was Matsudaira Tōko-san, right?”

“Where did you go? I tried looking around K station yesterday.”

“...Well.”

Yumi was frankly amazed at how her life somehow managed to be constantly in the spotlight. But she couldn’t just sit there dumbfounded, she had to think.

So then, how to weather this storm?

If she were Shimako-san, she would only have to smile to evade their concentrated attack. Even if Yumi wanted to emulate her, they were fundamentally different. Yumi would only succeed in creeping them out with a forced smile.

(That’s right. There’s a phrase that’s perfect for this situation.)

Yumi thought, ‘What was it?’ as she looked at her classmates, who were anxiously waiting to see what would come out of her mouth. Mami-san had taught it to her, a magic phrase that would get her out of this kind of situation.

“Umm, it’s that thing.”

Yumi raised her right index finger, and twirled it around.

“That thing?”

Her classmates shook their heads blankly.

“Right. That, that thing.”

It was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t quite get it out. What was it? She knew what it was, but she just couldn’t find that phrase that meant something like a promise.

“Oooooh.”

Well, she’d come this far. The girls asked her, ‘Are you okay?’ and ‘Does it hurt?’ as Yumi grimaced, trying to force sound through her larynx.

“It’s annoying. The words aren’t coming out.”

“Huh?”

Instantly the worried expressions all changed to relieved expressions, well, all except for Yumi’s.

“There’s a phrase for it.”

Yumi told her classmates, who were starting to recover from shock. But having said that there was a phrase, she was still no closer to working out what the phrase was.

“It’s not so much a promise, **more an order?** Right, at the end I was given an order. A... Mumble, mumble order.”

“Hasekura Rei?”

“No!”

“An order to show compassion to all living things?”

“Shorter than that.”

“A suppression order?”

“That’s it!”

“That’s it, huh?”

After a cheer of relief, there were high fives all around.

“Well, if you’re under a suppression order, that’s all there is to it.”

Yumi's classmates let her off surprisingly easily, perhaps in part from a shared sense of achievement they felt from uncovering that buried phrase.

Leaving the cluster of girls, Yumi saw Mami-san and Tsutako-san standing by the door, looking at her.

"Gokigenyou. Have you just arrived?"

The pair responded in the negative to her question.

"We were just waiting for the right time to join in and help you out."

"It started to get interesting when you said, 'It's that thing,' but in the end we were forced to sit this one out, right?"

The editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban and the self-described photography club ace looked at each other and smiled.

"Heey."

Since they were watching, they should have helped out. None of this watching because it was interesting nonsense.

"You got there on your own, so it's all good."

Yumi paused to think when Mami-san told her this. Maybe she had a point.

"Exactly."

Tsutako-san agreed as she raised her camera. It sounded like praise, but things felt kind of awkward.

"Ehehehe. I'm just heading off to my onee-sama's classroom."

Looking at her watch, Yumi saw it was the perfect time. The peak time for high school students arriving at school was almost over.

"Okay, take care."

Yumi headed out into the hallway after hearing these words and the cheerful sound of a shutter clicking coming from her two friends.

Yumi instinctively drew her shoulders inwards as she stepped from the heated classroom into the cool hallway. However, as she watched the students walking past her, she soon felt as though this wasn't necessary.

Part 3.

“Huh? She hasn’t arrived yet?”

Sachiko-sama’s classmate said, ‘Yeah,’ as she looked pityingly at the junior who had come all the way from a separate school building to ask the question.

“Which is unusual for Sachiko-san.”

She said, as though reading Yumi’s facial expression. Since this girl’s seat was right next to the door, Yumi had probably talked with her on numerous occasions.

“Umm, is it just that she’s not currently in the classroom?”

Like if she’d arrived at school, but just ducked out to go to the toilet. Or if she was on duty. Yumi considered the possibilities.

“I’ll check.”

The girl swiveled her upper body around, looking behind her. Focusing on the seat in the exact center of the classroom. Taking the bait, Yumi also leaned forwards a fraction.

“Too bad. Sachiko-san’s bag isn’t there.”

“I guess not.”

From what Yumi had seen over the girl’s shoulder, the classroom was deserted. There were probably only five people in there. Yumi had only caught a glimpse inside, but she hadn’t seen any unattended bags either.

“Ah... In general attendance is poor, but since Sachiko-san doesn’t have to take an entrance exam, she’s been coming every day.”

“That’s true.”

Yumi nodded. Naturally she was already aware of this, since it concerned her onee-sama. Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama had been coming to school every day without fail. Even if Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama hardly ever visited the Rose Mansion now that they were ‘comfortably retired’ and had entrusted the running of the Yamayurikai to the three second-years, they were still close sœurs. They would still meet at least once a day to talk, even without the Rose Mansion. Well, there were some days when they did little more than exchange greetings.

“I understand. Thank-you for your assistance.”

Yumi expressed her gratitude, then turned to leave the third year pine group classroom behind.

“If Sachiko-san arrives, I’ll tell her that Yumi-san came to see her.”

“Ahh, don’t bother. I’ll come back at lunch-time to see if she’s here.”

Yumi bowed once more to the kind senior, then strode off down the corridor.

Yumi then went directly to the main entrance and took this opportunity to peek into the shoe box room.

And even though she walked all the way there, it goes without saying that she didn’t run into the person she was looking for – those fairytale stories just don’t happen. Ogasawara Sachiko-sama’s figure was nowhere to be seen amongst the students hurriedly changing their shoes atop the wooden floor.

The flow of students changing their shoes was uninterrupted, but in one of the quieter moments Yumi stealthily positioned herself in front of the shoe box with the ‘Ogasawara Sachiko’ name-tag.

(Will it be her indoor shoes? Or her outdoor shoes?)

Heads or tails. Odd or even. That was the feeling Yumi had as she opened the locker door.

(– Indoor shoes.)

Which meant that she hadn’t arrived yet, after all.

Yumi glanced at her watch. The first bell would ring soon. The students’ movements were even more frantic. They had probably been running, several of them were breathing heavily.

Indeed, late.

(I wonder if she’s taking the day off.)

Truthfully, Yumi had thought about calling her last night. To give her onee-sama a report on the date.

Mami-san had taught her the phrase ‘suppression order’ to help her escape from a barrage of questioning, but there had been no formal request to keep this private. She was free to talk, as long as it didn’t affect the soon-to-be-published Valentine’s Date special edition of the Lillian Kawaraban.

However, when Yumi asked Sachiko-sama ‘May I call you after the date?’ on Saturday, Sachiko-sama had immediately replied with a firm ‘No.’ Her reason being that she had various events she had to go to, so didn’t know what time she would return. And since Sachiko-sama had said that she could wait until Monday to hear how the date went, she had, at least on Saturday, been planning on coming to school today.

Maybe she caught a cold? Just as Yumi was idly pondering this.
“Yumi-san!?”

Yumi returned to her senses after hearing her name called out so emphatically. Turning towards the voice, she saw a surprised looking person standing near the second-year lockers, looking back at her. Naturally, she knew the girl with the trademark twin long braids veeeery well. They were both in the same class, and both in the same position as boutons. That fearless warrior, Shimazu Yoshino-san.

“I have no idea what you’re doing, but if you keep standing there you’re going to be late.”

Looking around, Yumi saw there was hardly anyone left. Everyone had dashed off to their classrooms.

“Oh no.”

No matter how early Yumi had arrived at school, if she wasn’t in the classroom in time for morning prayers she was out. She had been saved by Yoshino-san’s arrival. As Yumi chased after her friend, who moved with unbelievable speed for someone whose weak body meant they could only spectate during PE until midway through their first year of high-school, she felt an inexplicable need to look over her shoulder.

(Huh?)

Yumi couldn't believe her eyes. What she had seen was just too incredible.

"What, why have you stopped? Let's go."

At Yoshino-san's urging, she resumed running.

The chimes started ringing all too soon, so Yumi couldn't run off to double-check. Therefore, the most likely conclusion was that she had been wrong about what she saw.

Because.

The girl with the long, disheveled hair running in the direction of the third-year classrooms had been, well, Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

And that was absolutely, completely, impossible.

Part 4.

“Well, you must have been mistaken.”

Yoshino-san decisively declared. Cutting through the Gordian knot. As expected, her rationale was that there was no way it could have been Sachiko-sama. It was inconceivable for anyone who knew Sachiko-sama’s usual behavior to think that the running figure could have been her. This was the same opinion that Yumi held.

It was during the break between the first and second classes.

In the end, Yumi and Yoshino-san had arrived at their classroom just in time for the start of the morning prayer broadcast. That was immediately followed by the morning hymn, which they both sang while still out of breath. Then came homeroom, which passed uneventfully. And while they both had the same first class of the morning, regrettably, their seats weren’t close enough to allow them to talk.

But then the first class had finished about five minutes early and Yoshino-san came flying over to Yumi’s desk as soon as the formalities of standing and bowing were completed. Finally they were free to talk.

They both knew a little bit about each others date yesterday. But they wanted to hear the particulars – where they went, how their partner acted – so badly that they had barely paid any attention during the preceding class. As evidence of that, Yoshino-san had to ask their teacher to repeat a question twice before she could answer it.

There were so many things Yumi wanted to ask but she was a bit reluctant to do so, having recently used the ‘suppression order’ excuse. The question was, would she be able to hold out until after school, when they could discuss this at the Rose Mansion?

“By the way, Yoshino-san, why were you so late this morning?”

Yumi thought she’d try asking an innocuous question.

Yoshino-san usually arrived at school about the same time every day. Since she walked to school, she was unaffected by bus or train delays.

“That’s because...”

Yoshino-san looked sullen as she answered.

“I overslept.”

“Ohh... That’s unusual.”

“It’s because I wasn’t going to school with Rei-chan.”

Yumi was taken by surprise when Yoshino-san slammed her fist down on the desk.

“Whaa? Yoshino-san, does Rei-sama usually wake you up!?”

Just what you’d expect from the closely related and closely located Yellow Rose sisters.

Not satisfied with her onee-sama merely serving as a house-sitter, tea server and target for her to throw cushions at, Yoshino-san had also turned her onee-sama into a substitute alarm clock.

Now here was a scoop for the front page of the Lillian Kawaraban. The headline practically wrote itself.

“The Opposite Sisters: Petite Sœur Master and Grand Sœur Maid.”

At Yumi’s obvious excitement, Yoshino-san said:

“It’s not like that.”

“Okay.”

Yumi smiled, relieved. Ahh, what a surprise that had been. And while she was sure it wasn’t Rei-sama she had seen this morning, it was completely believable that Rei-sama would have done such a thing, unlike Sachiko-sama.

“...It doesn’t happen all that often.”

“Huh?”

Even if it doesn’t happen all that often, it still happens. As was her custom, Yumi secretly tried to imagine herself in the same situation as the Yellow Rose sisters, but the thought of Sachiko-sama coming all the way to her house and then waking her up was just so unlikely that she couldn’t picture it.

“My mother, she’s a bit of an airhead.”

Yoshino-san twirled the tips of her braids around her fingers as she spoke.

“If I’m not out of bed after about an hour, she’ll make the wrong assumption. It might seem obvious, but she doesn’t think to come and wake me up. So I’ll just sleep the whooole time. So then, when I’m not out the front of my house at the usual time, Rei-chan will come to my room and get me out of bed and ready for school in five minutes, and then take me to school.”

But now with entrance exams and result publications and what-not, there were some days when Rei-sama would come to school and some days when she wouldn’t. Obviously, there’s no way Rei-sama would wake Yoshino-san up on those days when she wasn’t going to school. Yoshino-san probably understood that well enough, but had been caught unprepared this morning. She probably slept right through the alarm because of her exhaustion from yesterday.

“So, strange as it may seem, that could have been Sachiko-sama.”

“Eeeh?”

The ‘that’ that Yoshino-san referred to was the ‘mistake’ that Yumi had seen.

“When you first said it, my immediate reaction was that there was no way it could have been Sachiko-sama. But there are very few things you can say about any human with absolute certainty.”

“Well, that’s true.”

But would Sachiko-sama, whose favorite phrases included ‘Your tie’s crooked,’ ‘No running in the hallway,’ ‘Don’t make such a fuss,’ and ‘Would you please calm down a bit,’ really run down the hallway with her skirt tossing and her collar flapping?

“Anyway, if you thought it was Sachiko-sama then it must have been Sachiko-sama. A sœur’s intuition is not something you question.”

“I wonder.”

“Why don’t we check?”

Yoshino-san glanced at her watch. Yumi too let her gaze fall on the dial. Fortunately, since the previous lesson had finished early, there was still a decent amount of time remaining in the break. Plenty of time to make it over to the third year classrooms and back.

“If Sachiko-sama isn’t in the third year pine group classroom, then you must have been mistaken after all.”

“And if she is?”

Yumi asked, as she rose from her seat.

“In that case...”

“In that case?”

Yoshino-san smiled.

“The probability that it was Sachiko-sama just went through the roof, don’t you think?”

Part 5.

And that's why, about three minutes later, Yumi was standing in front of the third-year pine group classroom.

She was here because she had always intended to come back during her break. This was what Yumi kept telling herself. However, each time she thought it, it still sounded like an excuse. Perhaps she was feeling guilty about tracking down her onee-sama.

The front door of the classroom was half open, so Yumi peeked inside. Sachiko-sama was nowhere to be seen inside the still mostly empty classroom.

(I must have been mistaken after all.)

Since Sachiko-sama wasn't at school, then it must have been someone else that she had seen earlier.

What kind of nonsense had she been thinking? Yumi smiled wryly. There was no way that the angelic Ogasawara Sachiko-sama would be reduced to uncouthly running through the hallways. Yumi was glad she had taken such drastic measures to determine the truth. A happy ending all around. – After a few joyous steps Yumi ran into someone she hadn't expected to see.

“Yumi.”

“O... Onee-sama.”

Standing in front of her was Ogasawara Sachiko-sama. Running into a third-year student, like Sachiko-sama, near the third-year classrooms was hardly something unexpected. But as Yumi had just recently concluded that Sachiko-sama wasn't at school, she was left flustered.

“Go... Gokigenyou. Have you just arrived at school?”

If Sachiko-sama was in the classroom, then the probability that it had been her went through the roof. Yoshino-san's words came rushing back to her.

“What a silly thing to say. I've been here for hours. What time do you think it is?”

As further proof, Sachiko-sama wasn't carrying her school bag. Nor was she wearing her coat. Finally, she looked just as beautiful as ever.

"I was in the bathroom. My hair was a mess, so I went to brush it."

As Yumi outwardly nodded in acknowledgment, internally she was going over her onee-sama's words.

Her hair was a mess? She's been here for hours? – Yumi had a bad feeling about this. However her musings were unexpectedly interrupted when Sachiko-sama cheerfully said:

"That reminds me, you came to visit this morning, didn't you?"

"Ahh, yeah."

"My apologies. I only made it here just in time for morning prayers."

Completely throwing out Yumi's previous conclusion.

"Did you oversleep or something?"

Perhaps that sort of thing even happened to Sachiko-sama, from time to time. However, she shook her head.

"I forgot to get off at the right train station."

Sachiko-sama seemed somewhat different to usual. This was probably the first time that she had ever done something like that.

But their short break was almost up, so as much as Yumi wanted to stay and have a leisurely chat all she could do was inform Sachiko-sama that she would return at lunchtime, and then leave.

Part 6.

“You said you’d be back during the lunch break.”

Sachiko-sama smiled as she looked straight at Yumi.

“And you really did come back.”

Sachiko-sama stepped out into the hallway and closed the classroom door behind her. Before the door closed, Yumi caught a glimpse of the words ‘Self-study’ written on the blackboard in large letters.

“I thought you’d be busy with other things.”

Sachiko-sama said, as she adjusted Yumi’s tie.

“If you want to talk about your date, then I don’t mind if I’m not the first person to hear about it. It can wait until we both have more time to talk.”

A group of three third-years walked past them. They were probably on their way to Milk Hall, since they were carrying their purses.

“It really won’t bother me at all. Even so.”

Yumi called a halt to this monologue that Sachiko-sama was slowly progressing.

“Well of course I want to tell you about it. But there’s something else we have to discuss.”

Yumi wondered what was showing on her face as she said this. Sachiko-sama’s face instantly tensed. As though Yumi’s spell had worn off.

“Really. I see.”

Eventually, Sachiko-sama nodded. Then she followed Yumi. She didn’t ask where Yumi was taking her. Perhaps having guessed that Yumi’s ‘discussion’ was not something that should be held in the hallway during lunchtime, she followed along as though it was perfectly natural that they should be going somewhere else.

Still wearing their indoor shoes, they stepped out through the main entrance. Even without her coat on, Yumi didn’t feel cold.

Yumi walked silently alongside Sachiko-sama, who wasn't saying anything either. Not only that, but for some reason Yumi felt as though she was about to start crying. It felt as though her chest should be tightening up.

The narrow path beside the library. They had walked along it together, like this, countless times. One by one, the memories came flooding back to her.

"Why do you have such a forlorn expression?"

Unexpectedly, Sachiko-sama broke the silence. Yumi stopped walking and raised her previously downcast head.

Next to Yumi, her onee-sama was smiling. Yumi wanted to ask, 'Why are you smiling?' but all she could do was smile weakly back.

"I'm fine."

Sachiko-sama's right hand gently brushed her cheek.

It was warm. Yumi hadn't been feeling the cold, but she knew it was there because of how much her exposed face had cooled.

"You're fine too."

The hand that had stroked her cheek eventually took hold of Yumi's left hand.

"See, I'm tightly joined to you by our hands. Don't worry, I'm not going to let go."

"Onee-sama..."

Even though Sachiko-sama had removed her hand from Yumi's cheek, Yumi could still feel its warmth.

"Won't you tell me what it is you wanted to talk to me about?"

Perhaps Sachiko-sama had absolutely no idea what this was about. Yumi thought so. No matter what Yumi said next, it wouldn't change how they were.

In that case, she would definitely be fine.

Even after Yumi becomes Tōko-chan's sœur, there's no need to cut her ties with Sachiko-sama. Similar to how after Yumi became Sachiko-sama's petite sœur, Sachiko-sama's relationship with Mizuno Yōko-sama remained unchanged.

In that way, the tradition of sœurs at Lillian's Girls Academy is passed down. Having taken a petite sœur, you have to accept the loneliness that comes when she becomes a grande sœur.

When they arrived in front of the statue of Maria-sama, Sachiko-sama naturally drew to a halt. Perhaps she had realized they were coming here based on the path they were taking.

Sachiko-sama unclasped her hand from Yumi's, then looked up at the white statue of Maria-sama. Then she slowly turned to look at Yumi.

What was it you wanted to speak about, her quiet gaze inquired.

Consequently Yumi's stomach tied itself into even tighter knots. Looking around, as though in answer to Sachiko-sama's question, a shadow emerged from the rear of Maria-sama's garden.

"...Tōko-chan."

Tōko-chan bowed deeply, as though she were trying to wear Sachiko-sama's whisper upon her head. Her nose was a bit red. It must have been a long wait in the cold for her while Yumi was visiting that third-year classroom.

There was no-one else around. On special occasions, like Christmas or Valentines Day, this area would be busy morning, noon and night, but not on a cold, ordinary day like today. There was always the possibility of some late-arriving third year student passing by, but it was unlikely such a person would go out of their way to bother them.

The three people faced each other. They formed a triangle, in front of Maria-sama.

"I see. So your report isn't just about your date."

Yumi saw acceptance in Sachiko-sama's face.

"You have become sœurs."

It was incredibly quiet, like the perfectly still surface of a lake that acted like a mirror.

"No."

Yumi shook her head.

“We haven’t yet formally become sœurs.”

“You haven’t become sœurs?”

Sachiko-sama repeated, as though she had heard a word that she didn’t understand. Yumi nodded, and drew out the rosary that still hung around her neck, holding it up for Sachiko-sama to see.

It was the rosary that she had received from Sachiko-sama, in this very spot, one year ago on the night of the cultural festival. Yumi always carried it with her, to the point where it seemed like it was a part of her body.

In the same way that it had probably been a part of her onee-sama’s body.

“So then...”

Yumi spoke.

“...Is it alright if we hold the ceremony in front of you?”

Sachiko-sama’s eyes widened. The white finger she had drawn up to her red lips trembled.

Sachiko-sama had probably been imagining all kinds of conversation topics as she walked down the path alongside Yumi. But she had obviously not predicted this.

There was a disturbance, as though a strong wind had caused a wave to form on the still lake surface.

“Onee-sama.”

Yumi asked for her blessing.

“Are you okay with this?”

Sachiko-sama looked first to Yumi, then to Tōko-chan. Tōko-chan meekly nodded her head in acceptance.

“This is what we both desire. Tōko-chan and I both want to have the ceremony in front of you, onee-sama.”

It had taken a long time.

Lots of things had happened.

But having overcome all kinds of trials and tribulations, they were about to join together as sœurs.

Even Maria-sama must have fretted as she watched over them. That was why this location, the place where so many entreaties had been made to Maria-sama, was the most appropriate place for the ceremony to be held. And the place where, above all else, Yumi wanted her beloved onee-sama to bear witness.

Sensing the occasion, Sachiko-sama smiled and took a step back. Yumi took a step towards Tōko-chan, holding aloft the open rosary.

Tōko-chan leaned forwards slightly, lowering her head. Her fringe dangled towards Yumi.

It had been a long time for both of them since they had first awoken to their desire to become sœurs. Now that they were finally here, there was no hesitation. It would only take a moment to place the rosary around Tōko-chan's neck, but Yumi was still nervous. She felt as though Maria-sama might pat her on the back.

Time seemed to stretch out for Yumi as she carefully lowered the rosary down past Tōko-chan's head and onto her shoulders, making sure that it didn't catch on her hair rolls. After Yumi removed her hands from the rosary, Tōko-chan slowly looked upwards and straightened her back.

And with that, the two were officially sœurs.

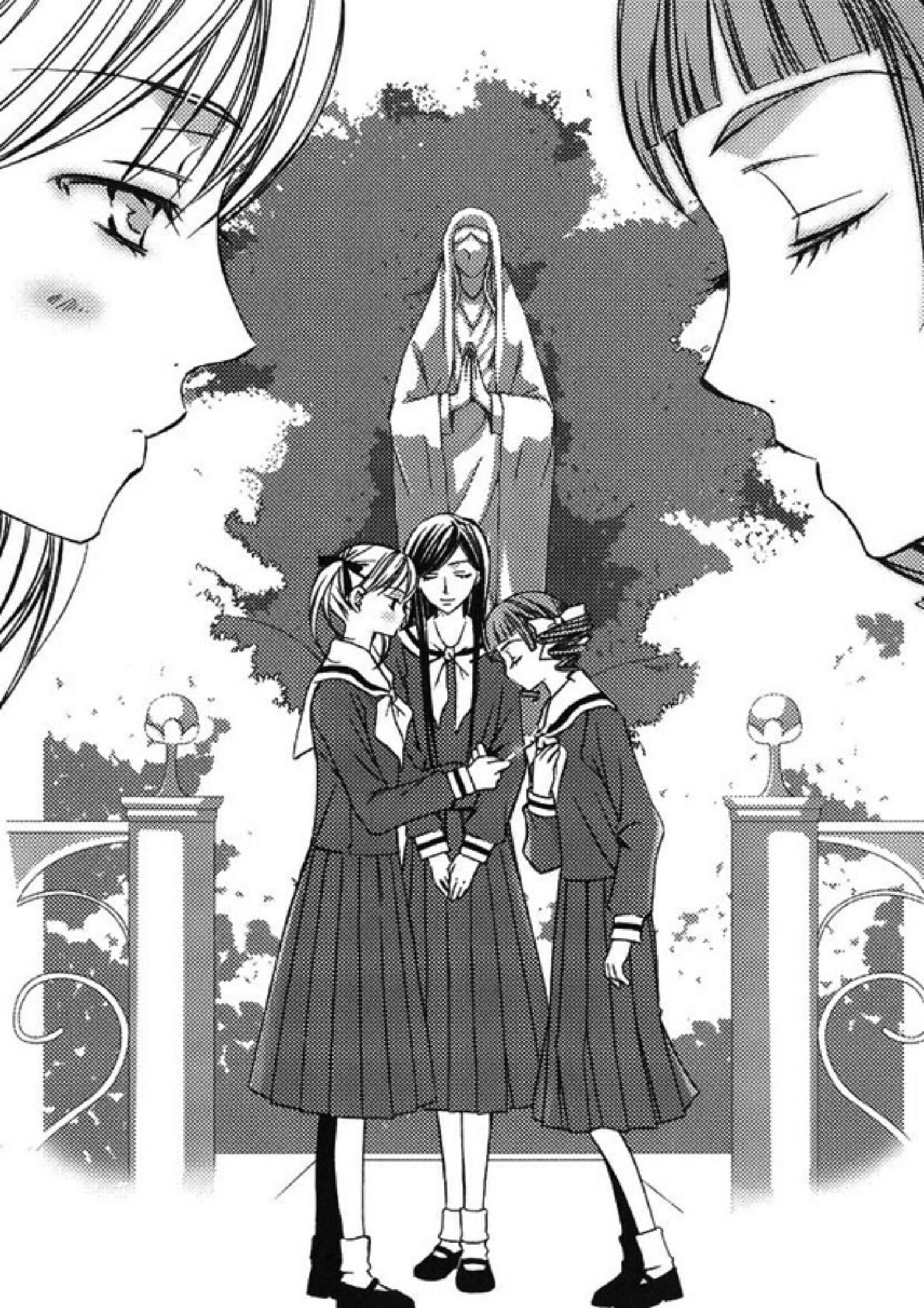
“Congratulations.”

Sachiko-sama placed her right hand on Yumi's shoulder and her left hand on Tōko-chan's shoulder.

“Tōko-chan. Some time ago I said that it didn't matter to me who became Yumi's petite sœur, but now, from the bottom of my heart, I'm glad that it's you.”

“Thank-you. I will try my hardest to live up to the name of Rosa Chinensis en bouton's petite sœur.”

“You'll be fine.”



Sachiko-sama said the same thing to Tōko-chan that she had said to Yumi just previously. Then she took a deep breath and smiled brightly, as though she had just switched TV channel.

“Well then, Yumi.”

“Yes.”

“Did you have anything else that you urgently wanted to talk about?”

“Huh? Nope.”

The rosary ceremony was the main event. It wasn’t that Yumi didn’t have anything she wanted to talk to Sachiko-sama about, it’s just that none of it was what she would call particularly urgent. Things like yesterday’s date, and the future.

“Well then, my apologies, but is it okay if I take my leave now? There are some things that I should do during the lunch break.”

Sachiko-sama turned towards the school buildings.

“Ahh, I’m sorry I dragged you all the way out here.”

Yumi had said she had something she wanted to talk about, and then dragged her onee-sama out here, all without asking whether or not it was convenient for her. And since Yumi had shown up as soon as the lunch break had started, Sachiko-sama wouldn’t have even had time to eat her lunch. Of course, Yumi didn’t think that her onee-sama meant that she had to eat her lunch when she said she had things to do. Now that Yumi thought about it, she realized that her onee-sama had been quite busy recently. She should probably ask her about it when they had time to chat at length.

“That’s not it at all. I’m glad you brought me here.”

“Okay.”

Just by looking at her onee-sama, Yumi could tell that it hadn’t been a bother to her.

“You two don’t have to hurry on account of me, take your time returning.”

Sachiko-sama walked off, leaving them with those words.

“Thank-you.”

Yumi and Tōko-chan bowed, then watched Sachiko-sama walk away. They remained in place, silently standing next to each other and watching Sachiko-sama’s retreating figure until she was out of sight.

Before too long, that beautiful, tall figure disappeared behind a grove of trees. They remained still for a moment afterward, as the sight lingered in their memory. Eventually, Yumi broke the silence.

“Tōko-chan, becoming sœurs is just the start of our work.”

When Yumi said this, Tōko-chan got a strange look on her face. The kind of look you get when you put an odd flavored candy in your mouth.

“What?”

Tōko-chan asked, staring straight at Yumi. Tōko-chan seemed to be looking for some hidden meaning, but, alas, Yumi wasn’t hiding anything so no matter how long she waited, nothing more would happen. Upon realizing this, Tōko-chan smiled, somewhat disheartened, and said:

“Please just call me ‘Tōko.’”

“Oh.”

Unable to process this sudden request, Yumi put herself on guard, ready to defend herself against a frontal assault. But, really, this time Yumi was in the wrong for being surprised. Now that they were sœurs, it was only natural that they would change how they called each other. So it was an extremely reasonable request from Tōko-chan.

“Ahh, I see. But.”

It would be hard for Yumi to suddenly change how she addressed Tōko-chan. Especially after 11 months of addressing her a certain way.

Tōko-chan smiled coolly as Yumi panicked.

“I see what’s going on. I suppose you also found it hard to call Sachiko-sama ‘onee-sama’ then, didn’t you, onee-sama?”

“Oooooh.”

Yumi had no comeback. Tōko-chan had hit the nail on the head.

“In that case –”

“In that case?”

Tōko-chan looked defiant as she repeated Yumi’s words. That’s when Yumi realized what had happened, and swallowed the words she had intended to say.

“...No fair.”

The phrase had just rolled off Tōko-chan’s tongue so fluently moments before. The first ‘onee-sama’ had been referring to Sachiko-sama, but there was no mistaking that the second ‘onee-sama’ referred to Yumi.

Since Tōko-chan had so effortlessly cleared the hurdle of addressing Yumi as ‘onee-sama,’ there was no way Yumi could counterattack by saying, “In that case, you should start by addressing me as ‘onee-sama.’”

“What’s not fair?”

Even though she knew full well.

“Nothing. Anyway, we should head back soon otherwise we won’t have time to eat lunch.”

Yumi reached out her right hand to her sœur.

“Let’s go, Tōko.”

“Okay.”

The cool wind caressed her warm cheeks.

With that, the two of them headed off, walking side-by-side.

Everything’s fine.

The warmth of Sachiko-sama’s hand still lingered in Yumi’s empty left hand.

Conversation Stories

Part 1.

After school that day, having finished her cleaning duties, she ran into Rei-sama as she walked past the third-year classrooms.

“Oh – . Yumi-chan.”

“Gokigenyou.”

Yumi quickly checked Rei-sama’s appearance as she said her greeting. Rei-sama wasn’t carrying her school bag, but she was wearing her school coat.

“Have you just arrived? Or are you just about to head home?”

Usually, the second option would be the most obvious given the time, but Yumi knew that Yoshino-san had walked to school alone today, so she thought she check just in case. And then, as suspected:

“Just arrived.”

Was the response. Because of entrance exams, results publications and all kinds of other formalities, students who were applying to other universities were often absent or came and went at odd hours. Even Rei-sama’s handbag would probably have a manila envelope with the name of a university printed on it somewhere in there.

“Have you finished what you came to school to do? If so, won’t you join us at the Rose Mansion?”

“Yeah, I was planning on heading over there next. I’ve just come from the staff room, so I have nothing left to do here.”

Rei-sama had taken hold of her arm and was about to walk off when Yumi hastily called her to a stop.

“Wait, please. I was just going to visit my onee-sama.”

Yumi said, pointing at the third-year pine group classroom. She wasn’t just aimlessly wandering around. She had a purpose.

“Sachiko?”

Rei-sama tilted her head.

“If you’re looking for Sachiko, I ran into her earlier.”

As she said this, Rei-sama repositioned Yumi's arm so it was pointing in the opposite direction to the third-year classrooms.

"Huh? Where?"

"Just as I was going through the main gate. In front of the library entrance."

Yumi was glad she had met Rei-sama here. Without that piece of information, she would have been searching blindly. But after she'd taken a single step forward, this time it was Rei-sama that called her to a stop.

"I know you want to chase after her, but she might have got on the bus already."

Rei-sama explained that quite some time had elapsed since she had seen Sachiko-sama. Looking at her watch, Rei-sama said, "I went to the staff room after I left Sachiko, and I talked to my teacher for about ten minutes."

"So, in other words, she's probably gone home. My onee-sama."

Yumi said, in a miserable sounding voice.

"Yep. Why, had you arranged to meet?"

"...We hadn't, but..."

Yumi had come here because they hadn't made any arrangements. She had thought it would be a simple matter of heading to Sachiko-sama's classroom straight after cleaning and catching her there.

"This time of year, there's hardly any third-years around because of entrance exams. So our class will use the homeroom and self-study periods to do the cleaning."

"I see."

Not only that, some third-year classes would alternate who had to clean each day, since they had a smaller area they were responsible for. Satō Sei-sama had told her that long ago, but it had slipped her mind.

"Sachiko said she had some things to take care of."

“Ahh.”

Suddenly, Yumi felt drained.

“Well, just like our onee-samas before us, we generally won’t visit the Rose Mansion now that we’re on the verge of graduation.”

So that’s how it was. Rei-sama patted her on the shoulder.

“Yeah.”

That’s how it was. Yumi understood, having experienced it last year.

Moreover, the main topics of conversation at the Rose Mansion were currently the third-years’ send-off and the farewell party for Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida. The seniors probably didn’t want to get in the way, knowing their juniors would be busy preparing for these.

Still, Yumi had a faint expectation that they should come, if only for today. She thought her onee-sama would have felt the same, and been waiting in her classroom for Yumi to invite her.

“Well, you’ll have to make do with me for today.”

Rei-sama smiled brightly, and nudged Yumi gently in the back.

“Let’s go!”

Perhaps she intended to sound like a steam train’s whistle. Incredibly enthusiastic.

“Rei-sama, have you heard about the farewell party?”

“Oh, I’ve heard of it. Saturday week, right? After the send-off. Yoshino told me about it, maybe a week ago. Seems like you started preparing quite early this year.”

“Because of what happened last year.”

They both giggled, knowingly.

Exactly one year before, the current members of the Yamayurikai had the bitter experience of almost completely forgetting about the private farewell party for the Roses. Back then, they were able to salvage matters by hurriedly organizing the party after the third-years’ send-off, which was for all graduating students.

“Very dignified of you.”

“Yep.”

Yumi accepted the compliment without humility. Learn from your mistakes. Turn calamity into opportunity. If they were to repeat the same mistake, would their onee-samas really be pleased to have started such a tradition?

“Oh yeah, is Yoshino doing okay?”

“Yes?”

Yumi turned to look at Rei-sama as she answered. Rei-sama leaned over and whispered in her ear:

“This morning. Did she make it on time? The results for one of my entrance exams were published this afternoon, so I thought I’d have a leisurely sleep-in. But there was a shout from next door that was loud enough to wake me. It was Yoshino, shouting ‘I’m laaaaate.’”

“She made it just in time for the morning prayers.”

“Ahh, that’s a relief. The last thing I heard was, ‘Rei-chan you idiot,’ so I was afraid that she was going to blame me for being late.”

“Ahaha.”

Yumi could picture it. Yoshino-san flying out of her house, blaming everyone else and poor, innocent Rei-sama bolting up out of her bed in confusion.

Then, suddenly, Rei-sama came to a stop. Like a train carriage decoupled from the engine, Yumi too came to rest.

“I am glad that she’s feeling better. I just wish she’d show a bit more restraint.”

Yumi heard the somber voice coming from behind her.

“Oh.”

“Yumi-chan. Please look after Yoshino.”

Ambushed.

Yumi hadn’t been prepared to hear a last will and testament.

“You and Shimako-chan are the only two people I can ask this of.”

It seemed to Yumi as though Rei-sama had said, ‘Because Yoshino doesn’t have a petite sœur,’ but the sound itself was drowned out by the thud from Rei-sama’s brow impacting on the nape of Yumi’s neck.

Part 2.

The White Rose Sœurs, Yoshino-san and Tōko, formerly Tōko-chan, were already present in the Rose Mansion's second floor room.

“Oh, you’re here, Rei-chan.”

Yoshino-san spared only a quick glance at the appearance of her beloved Rei-sama. Instead she grabbed Yumi, who had arrived with Rei-sama, by the arm and walked her over to a corner of the room.

“Could it be, could it possibly be...?”

Yoshino-san whispered furtively.

“Oh, umm.”

“When I arrived, Tōko-chan and Noriko-chan were cleaning the room together. Then when they finished cleaning, they started preparing tea.”

“Ahh, I’ll explain properly.”

Yumi had asked everyone to come to the Rose Mansion after school to introduce someone, but she hadn’t said anything more. Or, rather, she had carelessly forgotten to mention that she was now a grande sœur. Thankfully, her level-headed petite sœur had taken the right approach.

“It was impossible to get anything out of her. Noriko-chan wasn’t saying anything either. Shimako-san looked as though she suspected something, but was politely pretending not to notice. We were all just waiting anxiously for you to arrive.”

So the moment Yoshino-san saw Yumi, she just couldn’t contain herself and came rushing over.

“I have to make a formal report.”

Upon hearing this, Yoshino-san let go of Yumi’s arm, as if to say ‘Go ahead.’

“A report to everyone.”

“Sachiko-sama’s fine with it?”

“I spoke to her at lunchtime.”

“I see.”

It was a shame that she had gone home before Yumi had a chance to invite her.

“Tōko.”

Yumi invited her over. Yoshino-san let out a small squeal of delight when she saw what was happening, but Yumi continued, unfazed.

“I, Fukuzawa Yumi, and Matsudaira Tōko, have today performed the rosary ceremony, making us officially sœurs. As sœurs we’re very new, and still a bit raw around the edges, but please watch over us fondly. Please take care of us.”

Yumi and Tōko both bowed deeply.

When they both simultaneously raised their heads, they were greeted with applause and congratulations from their friends. The greatest joy was the gift of happiness.

There had been plenty of doubts along the way. Yumi truly believed that this day was only possible due to everyone’s support.

“Noriko?”

Tōko suddenly dashed out from beside Yumi. Looking over at what was happening, Yumi saw tears streaming down Noriko-chan’s face. Plonk, plonk. Like drops from the god of crybabies.

“Noriko’s ecstatic.”

Shimako-san said. Noriko-chan was unable to speak because her throat was blocked from crying, so instead she nodded her head repeatedly in agreement.

“Noriko.”

Tōko embraced her friend.

“Just like a baby.”

Tōko joked, but Yumi could see the sparkle from a teardrop that had formed in the corner of her eye.

Just for a moment.

Then Tōko adjusted her bangs and used that opportunity to wipe her tear away with her fingertips.



Yumi thought Tōko would have been better off not hiding it. That would have been honest.

“Ahh... If I may.”

Rei-sama had her hand raised, as though she were in class.

“I’m overjoyed that I could be present on such an auspicious occasion. It’s not at the same level as this major news, but may I also make an announcement?”

Everyone urged Rei-sama to continue, whereupon she beamed happily.

“I, Hasekura Rei, have today made it safely through the entire university application process.”

In other words, she had completed all her entrance examinations and received all the results.

“So, how did you go?”

There was tension as the question was asked, then Rei-sama made the peace sign with her right hand.

“All passed.”

“Woo.”

“Incredible.”

It was just modesty to suggest this wasn’t big news itself. It’s no wonder she was in such high spirits. The sense of relief from knowing that she had finished her exams and passed would have Rei-sama on a high.

“So, have you decided?”

Yoshino-san asked, meaning which university Rei-sama would go to. Since she only had one body, no matter how many universities had accepted her she could only attend one.

“I’m still undecided. I’m going to give it some serious thought tonight.”

“Humph.”

Based on her bored response, there was no doubt that Yoshino-san found this uninteresting. Since there was no chance that Lillian's Women's University would be amongst them, they were all the same to Yoshino-san.

At any rate, everyone raised their black tea in a toast. The happiness multiplied, joyously, and everyone shared a laugh.

Even so, Yumi regretted that her onee-sama could not be there. If Sachiko-sama had known how enjoyable a time they would have, surely she would have postponed whatever it was she was doing.

Part 3.

The following day, after school, Yumi was in the newspaper club's clubroom.

“How times change.”

Someone said, letting out a theatrical sigh.

“Who would have thought that the day would come when a future Rose would volunteer material to the Lillian Kawaraban.”

It wouldn't have mattered if she had remained seated, but the pony-tailed student deliberately stood up and turned her back on the computer she had been using. Both arms open, talking in a loud, clear voice. – She was in fine form.

“It's been a while since we've talked, Minako-sama.”

Yumi had initially recoiled from this unexpected meeting with someone who had seemingly been lying in wait, but she could still manage a greeting.

“You seem to be in a good mood.”

“Indeed. My mood is incredibly good.”

Yumi was surprised, so Mami-san whispered into her ear:

“My onee-sama was accepted into her first choice university.”

“Ahh, is that it.”

Yumi had come here because she had something to talk to Mami-san about. It wasn't something secret, so Yumi didn't mind that there might be other club members here who would overhear their conversation. And then that one student with her back to them had suddenly turned around and said, ‘How times change.’

That person was Tsukiyama Minako-sama, the former head of the newspaper club and former editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban, the one who had passed all this responsibility on to her petite sœur, Yamaguchi Mami-san.

On a somewhat related note, Mami-san and Yumi were in the same class so they could have talked in their classroom. However, Yumi had something to say to Mami-san in her capacity as editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban and not as a classmate, so going through official channels meant coming to the newspaper club's clubroom.

The supposedly-retired Tsukiyama Minako-sama moved in front of Yumi, brushing aside the person she had originally been talking to.

“The newspaper club is delighted to take you up on your offer.”

Ahh, so cheeky of her to act as the newspaper’s representative. The real representative, Mami-san, was smiling ruefully beside her. Understanding her onee-sama’s personality, Mami-san seemed content to let Minako-sama continue until she had worn herself out. Hurriedly abandoning the battlefield, Mami-san started looking over some documents.

“So, to sum it up, you want to use the Lillian Kawaraban to announce that you have taken a petite sœur. That’s what we’re talking about, right Yumi-san?”

“Yes.”

Reluctantly, Yumi decided to continue talking to Minako-sama. It didn’t matter who she was actually talking to, as long as Mami-san was in the room she would hear and Yumi might still be able to achieve her goal.

“Just something small, in the corner of the Lillian Kawaraban, would be fine.”

Yumi made a small gap with her thumb and index finger, about the size of an azuki bean, as she said this.

“Something small?”

Minako-sama’s eyes sparkled.

“Yeah. Something small.”

Annoying. Yumi hadn’t really known what would be considered something small. Perhaps she should have started with something the size of a sesame seed.

“Ho-hohoho.”

Suddenly, Yumi heard loud laughter. Naturally, the source of this was Minako-sama.

“No can do, Yumi-san. You are Rosa Chinensis en bouton. Can the gigantic news that you have taken a petite sœur be let go of that easily? I certainly wouldn’t be able to let it go. It’s the will of our readers. The public demands it. It’s comparable to my earlier article with Sachiko-san, ‘Exclusive Interview with Rosa Chinensis! She Tells All About Her Petite Sœur,’ – no, I think it needs even more space than that. In that case, we have no choice. For something this big, we have to replace next week’s edition with a special devoted entirely to the birth of the Rosa Chinensis en bouton sœurs –”

“We can’t do that, onee-sama.”

Mami-san interjected.

“What?”

Drunk on her own words, Minako-sama suddenly turned on her petite sœur and bared her fangs.

“What, indeed. Next week’s edition is the special about the Valentine’s Day dates.”

Mami-san said coolly, without looking up from the documents she was reading. Incredible. She was still paying attention to their conversation even as she carried out her other work. Yumi let out a sigh of relief, now that she no longer felt Minako-sama’s intensity pressing down on her.

“Then we’ll bump the dates to the next issue.”

“Even though it’s the graduation special edition?”

“...”

Not even Minako-sama would be willing to cut back on the graduation edition. And what would happen if they postponed the date special for two editions? Freshness was key, after all.

“We put an announcement about the date special edition in this week’s edition. And I’ve already received the first report for publication in next week’s paper.”

Mami-san said, lightly tapping the manuscript she held in her hand.

“Incidentally, since we’re on the subject, this is the report for the Rosa Chinensis en bouton sœurs’ date.”

In other words, the report that Tōko had submitted. Tōko had given her a copy of the report yesterday, as she was about to go home, and said, ‘Please read it.’ Yumi had given Tōko the okay when they met in the hallway earlier today, so it looked like Tōko had handed it in not long after that.

“No matter how big a scoop it is, I won’t slight someone who has gone to all this effort writing a report.”

Mami-san turned to her onee-sama and forcibly expressed her opinion.

Yumi did feel a bit sorry for the hyped-up Minako-sama, but all this could have been avoided if she had just agreed to a small notice in the corner saying, ‘Rosa Chinensis en bouton has chosen Matsudaira Tōko as her petite sœur.’ Something about the size of a wedding announcement in a regular newspaper.

But Minako-sama wasn’t about to give up.

“If you’re to be the editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban, that’s exactly what you’ll have to do, Mami.”

Her reasoning was hard to follow, but basically she was saying that emotions shouldn’t play any part in her decisions.

“The value in a topic is in how fresh it is. You have to publish it now, while people still are unaware of it.”

“Anyway, let’s suppose I did find some way to fit it into next week’s edition.”

Mami-san sighed, then continued.

“By that time, most of the student body would already know about it.”

“Then publish it this week.”

“Surely that’s impossible.”

Yumi too raised her voice. It was just absurd. She didn't know exactly how long it took to make an edition of the paper, but you had to get all the data for a story, then write it up, then proofread it and finally print it. Today was Tuesday. The Lillian Kawaraban was usually published on Wednesday, although it could vary depending on circumstances. Even though she wasn't in the newspaper club, Yumi could clearly see that it wouldn't be possible for them to have something ready for tomorrow.

“Don’t try and tell me what’s impossible.”

Minako-sama shrieked. She was incredibly worked up. She looked as though she was going to burst a blood vessel. Unless she could find a way to increase the number of Wednesdays in March, there wasn't going to be enough time.

“I’ve got it.”

Mami-san looked up from the document she had been reading.

“There’s a way we can do this.”

Mami-san, you must have misspoken. Surely you meant, ‘There’s no way we can do this.’

(Oh? But then what did she mean by that ‘I’ve got it.’)

“So, please tell us about how you intend to do this.”

Minako-sama glared as she looked back over her shoulder. It was obvious that she was in no mood for frivolity.

“That’s because...”

Mami-san spoke smoothly.

“We can do this as an extra.”

I see. – Wait.

What!?

Part 4.

“And so.”

Inside the Rose Mansion, Shimako-san smiled.

“You were forced to accede, Yumi-san.”

“...Pretty much.”

Seated in her chair, Yumi slumped her shoulders. She had felt under pressure just dealing with Minako-sama, but there was no way she could handle a tag-team of Minako-sama and Mami-san. You could say her defeat was sealed the moment she could no longer picture herself winning.

“But that’s fine, don’t you think?”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yeah.”

Easy for her to say, it was someone else’s problem. Even so, Shimako-san had become incredibly positive since she started her second-year, so she would probably still say it was fine if she were the one in this position.

“You don’t want the article to be too small, people won’t check every little corner.”

Were Noriko-chan’s words, as she brought over some warm tea.

“I see. That’s one reason.”

Yumi started to share the same opinion as the two sœurs. Currently, the only people in the Rose Mansion were Yumi and the White Rose Sisters, so it was a majority opinion.

“By the way, what happened to Yoshino-san?”

When Yumi entered the second floor room, there was a half-filled tea cup at the seat facing Shimako-san. It had probably been Yoshino-san’s. Yumi had last seen Yoshino-san leaving their classroom, saying “I’ll go ahead of you,” before Yumi set off for the clubhouse. Yoshino-san hadn’t said where she was going, but the Rose Mansion was the obvious assumption. Yoshino-san wouldn’t have said, “I’ll go ahead of you,” if she was going to the martial arts building for club activities.

“Well, about that. Tanuma Chisato-san came to visit, and they both left together.”

“Speaking of Tanuma Chisato-san –”

From memory, she had been Yoshino-san’s partner for their date on Sunday.

“Yeah, it seems like they were going to talk about their report. After all, when you put something in the newspaper, a lot of people will see it. So they were probably going to discuss whether what was written so far was okay, or if some parts should be omitted.”

Since she said this, did that mean that there were some parts of Shimako-san’s date that wouldn’t be in their report? Hmm, what was it? The name of Shimako-san’s partner. The name ‘Ami’ sounded familiar.

“Will you be okay, onee-sama? You haven’t talked to Ami-san about your report.”

Noriko-chan said, sounding a bit sulky. That’s right, it was Ami-san. Igawa Ami-san, to be precise.

“I’ll be fine.”

Shimako-san smiled sweetly. Apparently not noticing the hint of jealousy from Noriko-chan. Really, she could be quite dense.

“Why do you think that?”

Yumi thought it was cute of Noriko-chan, the way she was pecking away at Shimako-san – although she would never say that. She was subconsciously glad to see Noriko-chan, who always acted mature beyond her years, displaying some of the jealousy that more befitted someone her age.

“Because Ami-san has someone else she can talk to about it.”

“Someone else? Who?”

Yumi leaned forwards, unable to ignore such a statement.

“That answer will be in the Valentine’s Date edition of the Lillian Kawaraban.”

“Oooh. How about a preview?”

Yumi thought it was cruel of Shimako-san to say that much but no more, conveniently overlooking the fact that she hadn't said anything to her classmates earlier today.

"Teeheehee. It'll be interesting."

"Then I'll look forward to reading it."

Not even Noriko-chan could keep asking her directly. The power of Shimako-san's laugh was incredible.

"...Shall we get to work?"

Yumi stood up, trying to make up for the time lost by her late arrival. As she walked over to the corner of the room where the papers were stacked up, Noriko-chan called out to her:

"There's no work to do though."

Yumi couldn't believe her ears. She didn't have to look at a calendar to know they had a lot of preparation work to do for the third-years' send-off party. Every day, the documents they had to go through kept piling up. Decisions they had to make. On top of that, there was the farewell party for the Roses, so there was surely a pile of work they had to do.

"More accurately, there's no work that we can do right now."

Shimako-san explained, looking at her notebook.

"We can't decide what should be displayed in the auditorium lobby because we don't have the completed questionnaires from all of the groups who wanted to participate. Same for the order of events. The due-date for both of those is tomorrow. And it looks like we'll have to have a meeting to go over the flowers and other things we have to buy after all."

"I see. And since I wasn't here until just now, and Yoshino-san isn't here currently, it's decided that we can't decide."

Rei-sama and Sachiko-sama retired about the time the elections for the next term were concluded, so they were no longer attending Yamayurikai meetings either.

"It's no good if we decide with only two of us here, right?"

Shimako-san smiled.

That's right. Now that they were almost third-years, the Red Rose family had a new member. Which brought the total up to five people, making it somewhat more respectable.

"By the way, did Tōko have club activities?"

Remembering, Yumi asked Noriko-chan, Tōko's classmate.

"Yeah. She made a brief appearance here, helping out with the cleaning, before heading off. She said to give her regards to you, Yumi-sama."

"Ah. The third-years' send-off is coming up soon, isn't it."

Yumi had heard that the drama club, which Tōko was a member of, was splitting into groups and performing multiple plays. All the clubs participating in the third-years' send-off party were busy practicing. As usual, that statement went double for Tōko.

In spite of this, she'd already completed her report on the date and submitted it to the newspaper club, which was quite impressive. It was only barely noticeable, but Tōko really did have a very serious and methodical nature. At any rate, it was something to be admired and thankful for.

"I heard she was doing a scene with the club president. What kind of practice could they be getting up to?"

Noriko-chan whispered.

"Why?"

"It looks like she's been having club activities before school and during the lunch break, but Tōko, her arms and legs... How do I put this... They're covered in wounds."

"Wounds?"

"Yeah. Individually, none of them are that big of a deal."

Sounds like they were light grazes, or bruises like you'd see on a peach if you press down too hard. While they might be small individually, it was still worrying if there were lots of them.

"I met her today and didn't notice anything."

“You’d never know it when she’s wearing her school uniform.”

Apparently Noriko-chan witnessed this when they were changing into their sports tracksuits. Which meant that only her classmates would know.

“What did Tōko say?”

“She said it was no big deal, and not to worry about it. She seemed focused on the play, but didn’t want to talk about their rehearsals. I’m not an actress so I might not understand, but I prefer to have a clear distinction between reality and fiction.”

Noriko-chan tried to explain by using a convoluted example of painting in one color right next to a still-wet area of paint in a different color, causing the two colors to mix together disagreeably.

“That didn’t happen when she was playing Amy, though.”

Tōko played Amy in the drama club’s production of Little Women during this year’s school festival. Perhaps her preparations were different this time around. Needless to say, on the same day that she performed in “Little Women” for the drama club, Tōko also appeared onstage in the Yamayurikai play. But, perhaps due to a memory lapse, Noriko-chan wasn’t counting Tōko’s role as Minister of the Right in “Torikaebaya Monogatari.”

“Since Tōko said not to worry about it, let’s just keep quiet about it for now. I’ll discreetly try to find out what’s going on.”

Yoshino-san returned a short while later.

“I’m baaack. Ahh.”

Yoshino-san sat down in her seat, then flopped down onto the table.

“Working hard?”

“I’m exhausted. It’d take all day to go through everywhere we went and everything we did. The report’s supposed to be the date winner’s responsibility, right? So why did I have to be there while she thought about it? Chisato-san wrote one last year as well, so she should be good at it by now.”

Caught up in her own complaints, it took Yoshino-san a while to notice.

“Oh, Yumi-san’s joined us.”

Yoshino-san energetically got up and made her way over to Yumi, as though to make sure she hadn’t been mistaken.

“I heard this from Chisato-san, but apparently there’s a strange rumor doing the rounds.”

Yumi looked surprised when Yoshino-san pointed a finger at her.

“Me?”

It was probably about Tōko. Yumi had accepted that there would probably be all kinds of rumors until the Lillian Kawaraban extra came out.

“Nope, not you, but your onee-sama.”

“Sachiko-sama?”

That was unexpected. Yumi couldn’t even imagine what the rumor could be about.

“Hey. Sachiko-sama’s going to Lillian’s Women’s University, isn’t she?”

“That’s right.”

“And with priority entrance, they look at your high-school results so you don’t have to take an exam.”

“Yeah?”

That’s why it’s called priority entrance.

“So then, why is she frantically studying?”

“Studying!?”

“It’s like she’s obsessed with it – apparently she’s studying something during recess and self-study periods.”

People study every day. For someone to start studying to meet some goal, that in itself isn’t that strange.

However, you had to wonder when that person was Sachiko-sama.

“Was that something that Chisato-san saw directly?”

Yumi was completely unable to accept it. All she could think was, ‘No way.’

She knew her onee-sama was the type of person that never needed to study, either for mid-terms or for the end of semester examinations.

“Who knows? She said it was a rumor, so it was probably just something she heard.”

Yoshino-san said it could have been something like someone in Chisato-san’s class had an onee-sama in Sachiko-sama’s class. She didn’t seem to know who started the rumor.

Still, no matter where the rumor came from, there was probably one way of settling this.

“Next time I see my onee-sama, I’ll ask her about it indirectly.”

“I think that will be fine.”

Shimako-san agreed. Rumors were rumors, they shouldn’t be taken as truth. Even if the rumor itself was only that Sachiko-sama was studying, it’s possible it could be embellished into something preposterous.

“There will probably be a few people troubling us with questions about this. Having said that, it’s not something so huge that it will cause people to go out of their way to ask about it. So let’s leave this up to Yumi-san, as she is Sachiko-sama’s petite sœur.”

Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan agreed to Shimako-san’s proposal. Therefore.

“Very well, your humble servant accepts this responsibility.”

Yumi thumped her chest. Unfortunately, she thumped a bit too hard, and ended up having a coughing fit.

(So that means.)

Yumi wouldn’t have to carefully watch over just her petite sœur, but also her onee-sama.

A succession of worrying things had arisen since her arrival here.

Not Here

Part 1.

The same rumor had apparently been heard in a different location.
“What’s Sachiko-san doing?”

The following day, as Yumi was just leaving her classroom and thinking she should spend the lunch break in the Rose Mansion, she was captured by Tsukiyama Minako-sama, who had been lying in wait by the door, and dragged to the newspaper club’s clubroom.

“There’s no point in asking me.”

I don’t know. Perhaps the point of Minako-sama’s question was to see what kind of a response she would get. Minako-sama changed her questioning method after drawing a blank from Yumi.

“Strangely, she’s cramming. Sachiko-san, that is. Did you know, Yumi-san?”

“Mmm.”

Yumi answered non-committally. Even though she had heard that, it was only a rumor. Minako-sama probably didn’t know anything more either.

Minako-sama hadn’t said anything yesterday afternoon, so she probably hadn’t personally witnessed Sachiko-sama studying often. Still, she moved quickly when her antennae caught wind of something. Her species had a talent for laboriously gathering reports from all over and organizing them for their own benefit.

Yumi obediently parked her rear on the seat that was drawn out and offered to her. Although she really didn’t want to be here all that long.

“I don’t know anything.”

Yumi thought that she would be able to straighten everything out by talking to her onee-sama. Even so, this wasn’t something that would take Yumi out of her way to see her onee-sama, rather, it was something that she intended to casually raise the next time they met.

After all, it's not like the rumor was a matter of life and death, it was merely that Sachiko-sama was studying. And if Yumi were to confront Sachiko-sama over such a rumor, she would probably be scolded for wasting time.

"Cramming at this time of year, she could be preparing for the end of year exams. Except third-years don't have end of year exams."

"That's true."

Since she knew nothing, Yumi steeled herself to do nothing but listen. If she foolishly opened her mouth, she wouldn't just be causing trouble for her onee-sama.

Besides, now that Minako-sama had started, it was in her nature to keep going.

"Anyway, Sachiko-san isn't the kind of person who studies for exams."

"Is that so?"

Upon hearing Yumi's vague response, Minako-sama tensed. Oops. Some other phrase had been called for.

"Don't play dumb with me. Who do you think I am?"

"Umm."

What could possibly be the right answer under these circumstances? The former head of the newspaper club? The former editor-in-chief of the Lillian Kawaraban? While Yumi was pondering this, Minako-sama stood up.

"The Yamayurikai Freak. The Rose Chaser. Someone willing to become a stalker to learn more about those girls, someone who gladly gave her youth in the service of the Lillian Kawaraban. Tsukiyama Minako."

"..."

Someone who referred to themselves as a stalker.

"For three years now I've watched Sachiko-san. Of course I know that she never studies for exams."

Minako-sama looked at Yumi with a triumphant smirk.

“Don’t you think it’s odd that Sachiko-san, who doesn’t study for exams, would be studying for an exam?”

Indeed.

“But how do you know that she’s studying for an exam?”

Minako-sama would be well aware of Sachiko-sama’s love of literature. So she shouldn’t consider it unusual to see Sachiko-sama with a book on her desk, reading intently.

“She’s scribbling answers in some kind of question workbook. But the book itself has some kind of sweater-like cover on it, so you can’t tell what it’s for.”

“The sweater-like cover, is it the same color as powdered green tea?”

“I don’t remember the color, but it looked like it was knitted.”

“Is that so?”

Suppose it was the book cover that Yumi had given her as a Christmas present last year, then based on size alone you could rule out various types of books. There were several brands of question workbooks that each came in different sizes, but it would be quite a coincidence if one of the major ones just happened to be the same size as the book cover Yumi had knitted.

“What kind of exam is she –”

“I’ve told you, I don’t know. Why don’t you try asking her directly?”

Yumi leaned back against the chair in desperation as she spoke.

“Oh, so naive Yumi-san. Didn’t I tell you that I was a stalker?”

Tsk-tsk-tsk, Minako-sama swung her finger back and forth like a metronome. Well, she had a point, probably.

“She’s going to Lillian’s Women’s University.”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

It was around Christmas when she said it. “I’m going to Lillian’s University.”

Yumi had never actually seen the notice, but assumed that Sachiko-sama was granted priority entrance not long after that.



It hadn't even been three months since that declaration, so it seemed unlikely that Sachiko-sama would have changed her mind. But supposing she had changed her mind, it would be strange for her not to tell her petite sœur about it. For one thing.

"Are there still entrance exams going on at this time of year?"

"They're pretty much all finished."

"In that case..."

Before Yumi could finish her rebuttal, Minako-sama coolly interrupted her.

"Do you know about second round applications?"

"...I guess."

It's a system where universities have a second round of examinations to fill places that were left over after the first round of exams. Therefore, it's not unusual for these exams to be held towards the end of March or the beginning of April.

"By second round application, you mean for Lillian's?"

"As usual, you're quite the airhead. Why would someone who was granted priority entrance to Lillian's Women's University be taking the second round exam? Besides, Lillian's doesn't usually have a second round of offers."

"Oh, I didn't know that."

But her onee-sama said she was going to Lillian's University. So why would she have to study for some other university's exam?

"Maybe there's something she wants to learn to do, so she's considering going to a technical school. That must be it."

Minako-sama said, full of confidence, as she held her finger aloft. However, wasn't she fundamentally missing the point?

"Wouldn't the technical schools have their exams about the same time as the universities?"

"Ah."

Was she really someone who had only recently been studying for university exams? However, Tsukiyama Minako-sama was not one to back down quickly.

“There are schools where you don’t have to take an entrance exam.”

“But if there’s no entrance exam, there’s no reason to study, right?”

“Damn it.”

Now who’s the airhead?

“Maybe she’s going to study abroad?”

“I have no idea.”

Yumi’s head was spinning in circles. The first she’d heard of any of this was yesterday after school, during the conversation about Sachiko-sama’s study addiction.

Well, Sachiko-sama had seemed kind of busy recently. She no longer came to the Rose Mansion, she was only just making it to school on time, and two days ago she had hurried back to her classroom immediately after Yumi had presented Tōko with her rosary.

(Oh?)

It was strange, after all. The way she acted back then just wasn’t normal for her.

Looking at each incident individually, there was nothing there. But when you put them all together in a short period of time, it seemed to point to the existence of some unseen force.

“Anyway, we’ll have to end our little chat here.”

Yumi was still thinking about it when Minako-sama held something out to her.

“Huh?”

“Sorry, but I need you to read this now. If there’s no problems, we’ll print it today and distribute it tomorrow.”

It was the Lillian Kawaraban extra edition. Well, the test print of it anyway. There were some places where corrections had been written in red pen over the top of the printed words.

Even if it was called an extra edition, it was about half the size of the regular one. The headline and photos of Yumi and Tōko took up most of the page, the article itself wasn't that long. The review was quickly completed.

“So you didn’t drag me here just to talk about the rumor?”

Yumi handed back the test print as she said this. There weren’t any particularly worrying passages. Probably no need to check with Tōko.

“Well of course. Everything we’ve talked about up to now has been just a friendly chat, nothing more.”

“That you’ll turn into a newspaper article.”

“Not really.”

Minako-sama turned away.

“It’s just that I’m worried about Sachiko-san.”

Using the test print as a substitute folding-fan and fanning herself. Even though it was cold in the club room.

Part 2.

On her way back from the clubhouse, Yumi spotted Tōko.

Running through the courtyard like a galloping steed.

“Tou –”

Yumi started to call out, but stopped herself.

Right now, Tōko wouldn’t be able to hear her. There was a light shining in her eyes, but she wasn’t seeing her current surroundings.

The words that Noriko-chan spoke were hazy, but Yumi felt as though she could now understand them better.

About the clear distinction between the real and the fictional.
About the mess you make when you put a fresh layer of paint next to a still wet layer of paint in a different color.

Tōko was, at present, not here.

The girl with her hair rolls swinging as she ran, inside, was someone other than Tōko. Someone Yumi didn’t know, a character from a play.

Tōko flew into the clubhouse building that Yumi herself had left not long ago.

She had probably eaten her lunch in her classroom and would spend the rest of the lunch break rehearsing.

After watching for a little while longer, Yumi walked off towards the Rose Mansion.

Tōko would be fine.

There was nothing Yumi could do about the bumps and bruises. She couldn’t raise a fuss or distract Tōko from her task.

They were probably essential for Tōko to become that ‘someone.’

Part 3.

“If I knew you were going to the clubhouse, I would have asked you to stop by the manga club’s clubroom.”

A regretful Shimako-san was waiting for Yumi when she arrived at the Rose Mansion.

“Oh, right. Today’s the deadline for the questionnaire, isn’t it?”

“Hey, you, you’re always slow.”

Having finished eating and returned her lunch-box to its bag, Yoshino-san was leaning back grandiosely, looking up at the ceiling. In contrast, Yumi was just opening her lunch-box. Ooh, chicken for lunch today.

After thanking Noriko-chan for bringing over a cup of roasted green tea, Yumi spoke.

“But I talked to Minato-san about it today, and she said she thought they should be able to complete the form.”

Minato-san from the manga club was in the same class as Yumi and Yoshino-san.

“Hey?”

Yoshino-san shot Yumi a look that said, ‘Why didn’t I hear about this since we’re in the same class?’ before she spoke.

“If they can do it, why haven’t they handed it in?”

Now Yoshino-san had curled forwards, and spoke in a low voice. The busy-work was increasing and things weren’t progressing as smoothly as planned, and this was how Yoshino-san was trying to deal with it.

Well, Yumi could understand, kind of. The ‘Third years send-off’ was, in a way, their debut as Roses. The pressure to put on a wonderful display, without any assistance from their onee-samas, was enough to make Yumi want to scream like never before.

“Their club president has been absent and it seemed like the regular members didn’t know about the deadline.”

Yumi was deftly brandishing her chopsticks. Incidentally, the manga club's president was a third-year – Minato-san's onee-sama.

“Surely she would have known the dates for her exams and results publication beforehand? If she was going to be absent, she should have delegated to someone.”

“Oh, it wasn't exams, she's had a cold.”

“...Well, not much you can do about that.”

Yoshino-san finally backed down. Catching a cold was one of those things you couldn't plan for in advance. Although Yoshino-san did have a short whinge about how, regrettably, her cold seemed to be lingering for quite some time.

In contrast to that.

“Did the club president take the form with her?”

Already Rosa Gigantea, and having organized a successfully ‘Third Year’s Send-off’ last year, Shimako-san was calm as she inquired.

“Nope. Minato-san thought it was probably somewhere in the clubroom, so was going to look for it at lunch. Even so...”

‘They might not have enough time,’ Yumi thought. She'd been to their clubroom a while ago and there had been paper everywhere, with ink and pens stuffed into what little free space there was. The impression you got of the place was more of a storage room than a clubhouse. Finding a single print-out in there would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

“Sounds like it could be difficult.”

The other three seemed to have guessed the general state of affairs.

“It might be quicker to write out another one for them.”

Yumi took a blank survey sheet from the shelf and folded it in half.

“Anyway, leave the manga club to me. I'll get it from them today, one way or another.”

Having assumed this responsibility, Yumi returned to her lunch.

Part 4.

Yumi made her way over to the clubhouse after school and successfully collected a completed survey from Minato-san, just like she had promised.

Apparently Minato-san had spent the entirety of her lunch-break unearthing the one-page printout from within the mountain of paper. In other words, she had been in the clubhouse while Yumi was having her little chat with Minako-sama in the newspaper club's clubroom, as well as while Tōko was having her one-on-one rehearsal session with the president of the drama club.

“Sorry about that. Making you come all the way out here to get it.”

Minato-san giggled nervously as she gently scratched her short hair. Her voice was as cute as ever. Her appearance was boyish but her voice was sweet, and yet she drew horror manga. The discrepancy was huge.

“The lunch-break was almost over when I found it, and there wasn’t time to take it to the Rose Mansion so I left it in the clubroom thinking I’d do that after school. I was worried I’d lose it if I took it with me.”

The clubroom seemed tidier than the last time Yumi had been here, probably as a direct consequence of Minato-san’s lunchtime search. Initially, Yumi had been fascinated by a row of vividly colored illustrations that looked like they were on display.

“What are these?”

Yumi asked, pointing at a pile of monochrome sketches in the corner.

“Ahh. If we had the space, those would be on display as well. They were an experiment to see how differently you could draw mangas with the same layout and the same text.”

It looked like there was one page that served as the layout template, and then within that template the club members were free to draw whatever they wanted. The layout and the text were all identical, but the final products were all wonderfully different. A school story, a mystery, a period drama, and a horror piece. Even though the text was the same, they could use it however they wanted. The fact that they were all in black and white seemed to reinforce each piece's individuality.

“They’re good.”

Yumi admired them one at a time. Yeah, it had a strong impact.

“No, no. Our manga club still has a long way to go.”

Minato-san demurred, waving her hands like windscreen wipers.

“The drama club are incredible, the way they’re slamming around.”

“Slamming?”

“They’d come flying out into the hallway when they used too much force. I only saw that two or three times though.”

“I had no idea.”

The slamming seemed to be happening quite frequently. If that’s the case, then it’s no surprise that Tōko would have a few cuts and bruises.

“Are they doing some kind of pro-wrestling play?”

“Who knows?”

Yumi shook her head. The only thing that was written on the form they submitted and the program was ‘The Drama Club’s March Performance.’ Perhaps because they hadn’t decided on what they were to perform, or perhaps because they wanted to keep it a secret until the curtain was raised.

Either way.

“That girl with the hair rolls, she’s your petite sœur, right, Yumi-san? Is she okay?”

“...Probably.”

It looked like that rumor had already spread far and wide, even without the help of the Lillian Kawaraban.

Part 5.

As Yumi was leaving the clubhouse, she saw a familiar face.

“If you’re after Tōko-chan, she’s not here.”

The drama club’s president was wearing her school coat and carrying her bag. She’d probably left something behind in the clubroom and came back for it. Either that or she was planning on secluding herself in the clubroom and working on something.

“Oh, really?”

Yumi hadn’t actually come here to see Tōko, but there was no need to say that. When they passed each other, Yumi smiled and nodded, while the drama club’s president spoke.

“Because she wanted to go to the Rose Mansion today.”

Thinking that the club president was calling her to stop, Yumi slowly turned around. The club president was facing her. They had swapped positions but, as before, they were still facing off against each other.

Yumi had no unfinished business here, but it looked like her opponent did. Yumi fished the girl’s name from her memory. Internally, Yumi thought of her as the ‘drama club’s president,’ but there was no way she was going to use that when talking to her.

“It must be rough on Tōko-chan. Especially at this time of the year, now that she’s the petite sœur of one of next year’s Roses.”

“Tsukasa-san...”

The answer popped out of Yumi’s mouth before she was conscious of it. That’s right. Tsukasa-san. The girl’s name was Takagi Tsukasa-san.

Yumi had probably heard it from Tōko, when she was relaying Tsukasa-san’s consent to their becoming sœurs.

“I suppose you could call it selfless devotion. How she figured out a way to have time to help with the Yamayurikai work... By rehearsing during lunch break.”

Not knowing how to respond, Yumi kept silent. Tsukasa-san said, “Looks like you already knew about that,” then smiled and sighed.

“Then how about the cuts and bruises on her arms and legs?”

“Yeah.”

Yumi nodded. She hadn’t seen them for herself, but had heard about it from Noriko-chan.

“Yeah, you say. Can you really claim to be Tōko-chan’s onee-sama?”

Tsukasa-san seemed shocked as she spat that out.

“Huh?”

“Or is it that you think nothing of her because you didn’t have to put in any effort to make her your petite sœur? So you don’t care about what’s happening to her when you can’t see her.”

It took Yumi a while to comprehend this quick-fire stream of condemnation. She barely managed to deny the final statement that lingered in her ears.

“It’s not that I don’t care about her.”

“In the first place, how do you feel about her?”

No matter how you look at it, those words were meant to be an attack on Yumi. Yet for some reason Tsukasa-san wore an expression suggesting that she was the one being attacked. Of course, this was different from questions such as “What do you mean?” or “What’s wrong?” that her classmates would ask innocently.

“Hey, you. About Tōko –”

Normally Yumi could be quite thick-headed, but for some reason she realized what was happening. Even though she had snapped back, Tsukasa-san’s conduct was still considerably more impolite. Tsukasa-san looked away, her face reddening as though with anger.

“I like her. That’s why I asked her. ‘Please be my petite sœur.’ But don’t worry, she turned me down straight away.”

“...”

It would probably be inappropriate to say ‘sorry’ at this point. Even so, Yumi couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say, and silently watched Tsukasa-san.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. I knew that Tōko-chan liked you, but I’ve been wondering what you thought of her. It’s obvious you don’t hate her, since you gave her your rosary. So, then, how much do you like her? About half as much as I do? If only there were some scale on which you could measure love, I’d like to see that.”

There was no way to answer the question, ‘How much do you like her?’ Should she hold her hands wide apart and say, ‘This much,’ or perhaps use the expression ‘Taller than Mt Fuji,’ or, even, ‘Bigger than a galaxy.’

Feelings of love dwell within a person’s heart and they’re impossible to extract, so there’s no way of measuring them. They’re not restricted to the span of someone’s arms, or the size of a galaxy.

“Didn’t you only become sœurs because she asked to be your petite sœur during the Valentine’s Day event?”

Tsukasa-san’s gaze skewered Yumi.

“Answer me.”

Yumi thought about how to answer that question, and firmed her resolve.

Yumi thought, ‘This is a stage.’ There were only two characters in this play. At some point, she had strayed onto a stage from which she couldn’t escape.

I’m not an actress, but I’m not going to use that as an excuse to run away. To be rude to this person who thinks so highly of Tōko would also be to betray Tōko.

“It’s entirely possible that I became aware of my love for Tōko some time after you did. It’s also possible that if there were some way to measure the scale of our affection, that I would lose out to you. But my feelings towards Tōko are most definitely not superficial.”

Words can be used to say anything. It doesn't make it true. That's what Tsukasa-san's eyes were saying.

"We became sœurs after she asked to be my petite sœur. There's no denying that. However, prior to that, I had already been turned down by her once."

"When?"

Tsukasa-san's eyes went wide.

"On the day of the second semester closing ceremony. It was an honorable defeat."

"You lie."

"I would never lie about this."

It was Yumi's war wound. But despite this, now that they were sœurs she became able to face that event. At the time, Yumi had taken so much damage that she didn't know what she should do. In refusing the offer, Tōko had probably been hurt more than Yumi. It was Yumi's single most painful memory.

War wounds aren't something that you generally show to other people, much less use as a cover for a lie.

"I don't understand. Why would she turn you down?"

Yumi thought better of responding, since it was a question of Tōko's feelings.

"So, you see, I was the one who asked her. And on Valentine's Day, Tōko responded to my feelings. That's how I interpreted it."

However, Tsukasa-san wasn't about to accept that explanation.

"Even if you have liked Tōko-chan for so long, why didn't you say anything? Instead of silently watching. You didn't consider that I might have been beating her?"

Now that the question had been asked, Yumi paused to consider it. And then she found the answer that most closely reflected what she felt in her heart.

"Because I trust Tōko."

Probably. If anything happened, Tōko would tell her about it.

She would seek assistance.

That Tōko hadn't told Yumi about it didn't mean that it was something she couldn't tell her about, but that it was something that there was no need to tell her about.

"But, from now on, I think I'll be able to trust you as well."

Yumi smiled at Tsukasa-san. Looking closely at her hands, she had fresh scratches on her as well.

"Yumi-san..."

Tsukasa-san stood frozen in shock as she whispered this. Then, gradually, like ice melting, her face began to slacken. The mask fell, just for a moment, and her true face was visible beneath it.

"I was so annoyed whenever I saw you. I knew I might end up feeling miserable if I opened my mouth, but I couldn't stop myself. Finally, I said it."

Looking up at the sky, cursing her mistake.

"But, still. I knew I was going to say something one day. And even if I did end up feeling miserable, I would still have felt better about saying it. I was convinced I was right. So, I thought, why not have a go. But after actually saying it, I feel even worse. I'm such an idiot."

Tsukasa-san smiled after saying this. Instead, she had been shown how deep the bonds were between Yumi and Tōko. Then she turned to Yumi.

Her prominent breasts, the strength behind her eyes, her short hair and those proud cheekbones – she had the appearance of a model posing for a photo.

"But I'm not going to lose either."

Her mask firmly back in place, Tsukasa-san spoke in a loud, resonant voice.

"I don't think the match is over just yet."

"Huh...?"



“Oh, don’t make that face. I’m not about to snatch your cute petite sœur. But losing isn’t in my nature. So now I’ll just have to find something that you’ll never be able to do.”

Before Yumi even had a chance to ask, ‘What?’

“I’ll show Tōko-chan how to sparkle on stage.”

That was definitely something that Yumi wouldn’t be able to do. Not just Yumi. It’s possible that no-one she had met would be able to match it with Tōko in that arena.

For Tōko’s sake. For the sake of making Tōko sparkle, this girl was determined to go on stage. The only person who would be able to do that was, probably, this here Takagi Tsukasa.

(Geeze.)

Yumi thought, ‘Which one of them was supposed to be selflessly devoted?’

Then, in her mind, Yumi said ‘I’ll leave it to you,’ and bowed her head. Because if she said it out loud, the response would probably be, ‘I’m not doing this for you.’

“Sorry for detaining you.”

Tsukasa-san said, then turned her back once more. Turning towards the clubhouse she took a few steps forwards. She didn’t lose her focus, even as she was walking away. She was still an actress.

When Yumi turned around and started walking towards the Rose Mansion, a voice called out to her from behind. Turning around, Tsukasa-san was standing in the clubhouse’s entrance, looking at her.

“I’ve changed my mind about one thing.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad there’s no scale that can measure affection.”

Smiling brightly, Tsukasa-san disappeared into the clubhouse.

Part 6.

“Geeze, where have you been?”

When Yumi opened the ‘biscuit-door’ on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, Yoshino-san was waiting there, looking intimidating.

“What do you mean? I went to see the manga club.”

Hadn’t she told them about that during lunch? Yumi waved the recently retrieved questionnaire form in the air. There was no need to tell Yoshino-san and the others about her run-in with Tsukasa-san, as that didn’t relate to them directly. Tōko was there, just like Tsukasa-san had said, but Yumi didn’t plan to tell her about their conversation either.

Yumi handed the completed questionnaire form to Yoshino-san and was walking over to the drawer to return the blank paper she had taken at lunch when she heard a frosty voice calling from behind.

“You were late, so she went home.”

“Who did?”

Looking around, all the usual members were present. Shimako-san, Yoshino-san, Noriko-chan and Tōko. It was Tōko who spoke next.

“Rosa Chinensis, onee-sama.”

“What?!”

“She waited for about ten minutes, but then she left.”

Noriko-chan said, as she cleaned one of the tea cups. It was probably the one that Yumi’s onee-sama had sipped tea from as she waited for Yumi to return.

“How long ago was this?”

“About fifteen minutes ago. She said she couldn’t stay too long because she had something to do at home.”

Shimako-san said, her eyebrows lowered in commiseration.

“...She’s gone home then.”

“How unlucky is that,” Yumi thought. It was only at times like these, when her onee-sama came all the way to the Rose Mansion just to see her, that she wasn’t there.

“I wonder what she’s going to do at home. Study?”

Yoshino-san asked, folding her arms.

“Who knows. You didn’t ask her?”

“You said you were going to ask her, Yumi-san, so we all refrained from asking even though we wanted to.”

That’s true.

“Sorry. I haven’t asked her yet.”

“Hu-”

Yoshino-san’s overreaction made it seem as though the sky was falling.

“That’s why I said ‘sorry.’”

Yoshino-san expressed her disbelief at Yumi’s actions, so Yumi pacified her before turning to Shimako-san, who looked capable of holding a sensible conversation, and asking:

“Did she say why she came here?”

“She didn’t give a specific reason. Perhaps she just wanted to see your face, Yumi-san?”

“Like she gets unsettled if she doesn’t see your face at least once a day, that kind of thing?”

Yoshino-san teased from the sidelines. Yumi would have been overjoyed if that theory was true, but it probably wasn’t.

“We saw each other today, but just for a moment. We walked past each other in the hallway.”

“So why didn’t you ask her about the rumor then?”

Yoshino-san seemed annoyed at the delay, niggling away at her.

“Because we were moving between classes. All of our classmates were around, and I didn’t want to ask her about it in front of everyone.”

“Ah, back then, huh.”

Yoshino-san was in the same class and it didn't take her long to visualize the circumstances, so she let the matter drop.

Seeing that Yoshino-san had fallen silent, the usually quiet Shimako-san spoke.

“Tōko-chan, do you have that –”

“Yes.”

Tōko held out something towards Yumi, as a way of informing her what ‘that’ was.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a letter from Rosa Chinensis. I’ve been looking after it for you.”

A folded, white piece of paper was being held out to her. It looked like report paper, or similar, and was folded four times. The origami-esque manner in which it was folded gave it a completely different visual impression to the folded notes that were passed around during class.

Sachiko-sama had probably written it here, just before leaving, when Yumi hadn’t returned.

“Sachiko-sama left that behind?”

So Yoshino-san hadn’t known. Despite looking so self-important when she chided Yumi for her tardiness, it seemed as though Yoshino-san hadn’t actually been there when Sachiko-sama came to visit either.

“What could I do? I had to go to a kendo club meeting.”

“I’m not criticizing you.”

“You didn’t have to. Your expression said it all, Yumi-san.”

Good point. No matter how dignified or well-spoken Yumi tried to be, that fact still remained. She had a face that reflected whatever she was thinking, with stunning clarity.

(Oh brother.)

Yumi took the letter from Tōko and opened it immediately. Yoshino-san came over to have a look, but Yumi decided that she would read it by herself first since she didn't know what the contents of the letter would be.

Rudely turning her back on everyone, Yumi let her gaze fall on the words written there. Then.

“What’s this?”

She said, without thinking. Drawn in by Yumi’s voice, her friends gathered around and read the contents of the letter. They too were at a loss for words.

There were a mere three lines, written in that familiar handwriting.

Yumi,

Tomorrow after school, wait behind the gymnasium.

~Sachiko.

– Was her onee-sama challenging her to a fight?

Burning Bridges

Part 1.

Thursday, after school.

A gust of wind blew through the grounds of Lillian's Girls Academy.

It was the beginning of March, and the air still had a chill to it. However, the gust of wind was neither prolonged nor strong.

Winds of fortune, spring squalls, the east wind, the first storm of spring. The winds that blew during springtime were known by various names, but you couldn't use those names unless you knew which compass direction the wind came from.

Yumi walked along, enveloped by the wind. Or, perhaps, she had temporarily become one with the wind. Still clad in her indoor slippers, girls passed by her on their way home, alone or in pairs. She would soon reach her goal, the gymnasium.

Coming to a halt, she took a scrap of paper from her pocket. Countless times she'd run her eyes over the words written there.

"Yumi, Tomorrow after school, wait behind the gymnasium. Sachiko."

She'd received it yesterday, after school. After one night's wait, it was now 'tomorrow.' And, finally, after school.

It had been a long twenty-four hours.

After initially mistaking it for a challenge when she received it in the Rose Mansion, Yumi had spent the trip home weighing up what it meant. Well, not quite – what was written there was quite concise, so the meaning was plain to see. But what purpose could Sachiko-sama have for calling Yumi out, behind the gymnasium? Why were places like the Rose Mansion, the courtyard or even just outside her classroom unsuitable?

From memory, something similar had happened last year. Yoshino-san called out Torii Eriko-sama.

You're late, Musashi. Sorry for making you wait, Kojirō.

Even though they weren't likely to end up dueling, their meeting place still held those connotations.

Perhaps Sachiko-sama had, in some respect, transcended and was about to throw down a challenge to Yumi. Even after arriving home, Yumi couldn't put it out of her mind – she wracked her brain while eating dinner and taking a bath. She had thought that perhaps its outward appearance as a challenge was a fake and that it actually contained a hidden message, so she warmed it by the gas stove but, naturally, no new characters appeared.

Yumi thought about calling Sachiko-sama to ask her about it, but decided that if it was the sort of conversation that could be held over the phone then Sachiko-sama would have called her first. And she had probably left behind the letter because a phone-call would be an inconvenience.

That's why Yumi had been somewhat on edge ever since she arrived at school this morning.

What would she do if she ran into Sachiko-sama somewhere, before school had finished? They were in separate buildings, but there were days when they would pass each other two or three times in the hallway. If they did accidentally bump into each other, how should she react? Should she race off after a quick greeting?

However, those worries had all been in vain. Until now, Yumi hadn't seen her onee-sama at all that day. It wasn't as though she was running from place to place to avoid meeting her onee-sama, but Yumi seemed to cause a fuss wherever she went today so she had avoided strolling through the corridors.

The Lillian Kawaraban's extra edition was out.

It reminded her of events past, and the person she had become. During recess, spectators from other classes gathered. Unlike before, however, there weren't any who had come to see what she looked like, asking, "Which one's Fukuzawa Yumi?" Instead, they opened the door and said, "Congratulations," and waved at her. It was even difficult to go to the toilet, as girls who recognized Yumi followed her around. She was finally set free when the school day finished.

The gymnasium was built with the sports ground behind it. Therefore, the back of the gymnasium was a ‘back’ in name only – actually, it was a completely open area, that anyone on the banks of the oval could look down upon. This bright, open area was completely inappropriate as a place to summon people to, so it wasn’t a ‘proper’ back of the gymnasium.

The path Yumi was on continued to the oval, so she strayed down the left side and arrived at the gymnasium. Walking past the entrance, she noticed that both the internal and external doors were thrown open, allowing her to see what was going on inside.

The dance club were performing calisthenics next to where the basketball club was throwing a ball around. Tournaments and other events were all approaching, so various clubs had to share the gymnasium, auditorium and oval. From memory, the drama club were supposed to be using the stage after the dance club had finished.

Yumi smiled drolly as she thought this.

She had no reason to memorize the time schedule, but it was firmly embedded in her brain. Perhaps you’d call it an occupational hazard. She was a total Yamayurikai addict.

Yumi turned the corner, listening to the sound of bouncing balls. As she had expected, Sachiko-sama was waiting on the opposite side of the gymnasium to the path she had just been walking along.

Since Sachiko-sama had told Yumi to ‘wait’ in her letter, she probably expected Yumi to arrive first. While it was inexcusable to make her onee-sama wait, the second-years still had classes, homeroom and cleaning as usual, whereas the third-years were largely exempt from these. While Yumi came straight after completing these, she still arrived second. Sachiko-sama was forced to wait, even though she had already packed up, ready to go home.

“I suppose you’d call this the side of the gymnasium, rather than the back of the gymnasium.”

Lured in by Sachiko-sama's smile when she raised her head from the book she had been reading, Yumi smiled too.

"But this feels more like the back of the gymnasium."

An athletics storehouse was built a few metres from the outer wall of the gymnasium. Sandwiched between the two buildings was a kind of passageway. Students would use this when fetching things like hurdles, or high-jump bars, or those things you use to draw the white lines on the field, but it wasn't the kind of place you'd recommend for a nice stroll. However, if you were looking for somewhere out of the public eye, a true 'back of the gymnasium,' then it couldn't be beaten.

Sachiko-sama closed her book and put it back in her bag, which was leaning against the gymnasium wall. There was no way to tell what book was inside the cover that had been Yumi's gift to Sachiko-sama.

"What's the matter? Calling me out here with this letter that reads like a challenge?"

Yumi held up the letter from yesterday.

"Challenge?"

Sachiko-sama looked confused as she took the paper.

"It says, 'wait behind the gymnasium.'"

"Ahh, that."

Sachiko-sama giggled, as though remembering.

"I originally intended to write, 'Wait behind the gymnasium for me, please.'"

So, then, why didn't the letter she was holding have that written on it?

If Sachiko-sama had written 'wait for me, please,' then that would have been normal. Up until now, that was the sort of letter that Yumi had received. 'Please come to the women-only New Year's party I'm hosting,' or 'Come to the library with me, please.' Therefore, if Sachiko-sama had written, 'After school tomorrow, wait behind the gymnasium for me, please,' then the 'behind the gymnasium' part may have seemed a bit strange, but it wouldn't have been a cause for any concern.

“I accidentally added the full-stop after ‘gymnasium.’ It would have looked odd if I wrote, ‘Wait behind the gymnasium. For me, please,’ right? So I stopped after gymnasium.”

Sachiko-sama then explained that she wrote the letter using a ballpoint pen, so couldn’t erase it. Nothing to get alarmed about.

“When everyone else saw the contents of the letter there was a bit of confusion – they said it read like a challenge.”

It was a slight exaggeration, but Sachiko-sama handed back the letter, asking, “And you?”

“I didn’t think it was a challenge, but I thought there might have been some hidden meaning.”

“And did you unravel that hidden meaning?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Yumi didn’t mention anything about heating the paper, but the eagle-eyed Sachiko-sama must have seen how a corner of the report paper was now a light brown color, for she laughed and said, “You really are quite funny.” It seems like she took it for a joke, for Sachiko-sama was laughing quite hard, as though she had just heard a comedian’s punchline.

After laughing for a while, Sachiko-sama seemed quite pleased when she said:

“I’m glad that I was able to see you today. It feels like this is the first time I’ve laughed or relaxed in quite a while.”

So did that mean that for the last few days Sachiko-sama had been under constant tension and unable to smile?

“I’m in the Rose Mansion after school most days.”

So come and visit any time you want to see my face and relax, was the unspoken invitation. Even though Sachiko-sama had retired, there was no rule prohibiting her from visiting. And having her onee-sama by her side didn’t mean that Yumi was dependent upon her. Basically, there were some things she had to figure out for herself.

However. Sachiko-sama's response left Yumi dumbfounded.

"But if I went to the Rose Mansion, it wouldn't just be the two of us, right?"

"Ehh!?"

At Yumi's over-reaction:

"It's a joke."

Defusing the situation effortlessly.

"Huh?"

"Your eyes are spinning."

Was she being teased about her funny reaction? Just as Yumi started to think so, Sachiko-sama continued:

"But it's true that I wanted to have a nice, long look at your face. I remembered this place when I was searching for somewhere that would be quiet, without people coming and going. Originally I was thinking of a rooftop, but they would probably be locked after school."

"They wouldn't be locked, but they're all taken by clubs and other groups preparing for the third-years' send off."

"Ahh, that's right."

Sachiko-sama clapped her hands together, apparently having forgotten about that. Whether it was because she was no longer involved in Yamayurikai work, or because she was caught up in her much-discussed cramming for exams, it seemed as though Sachiko-sama's school rumor sensing apparatus had recently been switched off.

At any rate, since she had been called out here, Yumi figured that something was probably going on. She put herself on guard, in case Sachiko-sama was about to deliver her final requests.

But Sachiko-sama was true to her word, and watched Yumi closely. Without saying anything. As though there was nothing she wanted to say.

It felt as though the words that Sachiko-sama had in her heart were directed towards herself. As though by looking at Yumi, she was looking into a mirror and seeing her reflection. For something she needed to validate. Or something to firm her resolve.

“Onee-sama, did something happen?”

Yumi asked.

“Does it look like it did?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t keep anything hidden from you.”

Sachiko-sama sighed through her smile. Her facial expression seemed to indicate that she was happy, rather than disappointed, to have her thoughts read.

“Has something changed at home?”

“No.”

“Then is it something about you?”

“It may well be. But for now, it’s a secret.”

Naturally, the first thing that came to mind was the rumor that Sachiko-sama was cramming for an exam, but there was no way that Yumi could ask about it now that Sachiko-sama had forestalled this by saying it was a secret. Yoshino-san would probably be angry, asking what she was thinking, but Yumi decided that if her onee-sama didn’t want to talk about it just yet then there was no need to force the matter.

“You said ‘for now,’ so is this something that you’ll eventually be able to tell me about?”

“That’s right. Eventually.”

Sachiko-sama was saying that she didn’t know when that would be. It could be tomorrow, or it could be a year from now.

“Well, that’s okay then.”

Trusting that her onee-sama would eventually tell her about this, Yumi was prepared to wait.

“Yumi.”

Suddenly, Sachiko-sama stretched out her arm and pushed against Yumi’s shoulder.

“Ahh!”

It was a surprise attack. Naturally, Yumi wobbled and lost her balance. She moved her right foot back to try and support her weight, but it got tangled up with her left foot leaving her in an increasingly precarious position. Yumi grasped for something to cling to, but couldn't reach the storeroom's wall. Just as Yumi thought she was about to fall, the hand that had caused this whole mess appeared in front of her eyes and she desperately clung to it with both hands.

“What on earth were you thinking, onee-sama?”

Yumi protested, having regained her balance. She had no memory of ever being treated this shabbily before.

“I’m sorry. It was a mistake.”

“A mistake!?”

That was no excuse for pushing someone, for (an attempt at) making them fall over.

“You looked so solid, Yumi, that I thought you wouldn’t move even if I gave you a little push. And thinking that, my hand reached out.”

“Solid?”

It had been a while since Yumi had been on the bathroom scales so she wasn’t quite of herself, but perhaps she had visibly gained weight. As Yumi was thinking these absurd thoughts, Sachiko-sama made a gesture as though she was pondering something, then looked upwards, drew in a large lungful of air and, finally, gave a small nod.

“Are you free the Sunday after next?”

“Huh?”

Their previous conversation had been forcibly terminated. After all, she was someone well accustomed to selfishly doing things on her own timetable. That was just a part of Ogasawara Sachiko.

“The week after next?”

It would be Sunday in three days' time, so the Sunday after next was –

“The day after the third-years' send-off.”

Said Sachiko-sama.

“Yeah... I suppose.”

Yumi agreed, tentatively. With no idea whatsoever where this conversation was leading. She put herself on alert, fearful that the next poor response might earn her a kick.

“Well then, why don't we go to the amusement park?”

“Huh!?”

Sachiko-sama was a box of surprises today.

“To make some memories?”

“Make some memories?”

Sachiko-sama's stern eyes said that this was not something as lighthearted as that.

“This is revenge.”

“...”

When they went to the amusement park in autumn, Sachiko-sama began to feel unwell midway through and had to retire. While she had sworn that she would have her revenge, Yumi hadn't been under the impression that this was something that would happen while she was still a high school student.

“I shall accompany you.”

No matter where she was asked to go. Yumi would do her best to ensure that her onee-sama, who hated to lose, triumphed over the amusement park.

“Thank-you. But I won't ride on the roller coaster.”

“Oh? What about your revenge?”

“The roller coaster was always excluded, right from the start.”

It didn't look like she was going to back down on that, no matter what.

Sachiko-sama picked up her bag, ready to leave.

“Are you going home?”

“Yes. There’s a tutor coming to my house today.”

Standing beside Sachiko-sama as she checked her watch and calculated her estimated arrival time, Yumi was intrigued by her use of the word ‘tutor.’

Sachiko-sama had supposedly stopped all her extra-curricular lessons when she was a first-year. Yumi had never heard her mention a tutor since becoming her petite sœur. This seemed to reinforce the rumor that was circulating about Sachiko-sama cramming for an exam.

“I thought I’d just see your face and then return home. But I ended up telling you about the amusement park.”

As they were walking alongside the gymnasium, Sachiko-sama asked, “Why do you think I did that?” Inside the gymnasium, it looked like the basketball club were practicing their free throws.

Yumi couldn’t find an answer as she followed Sachiko-sama until they stopped at the fork in the path. Yumi would continue along the path as it went past the library and towards the school buildings, while Sachiko-sama would turn here, following the path lined with ginkgo trees to the main gate.

Sachiko-sama turned only her head towards Yumi, and spoke.

“**Burn one’s bridges.**”

“Huh?”

Since she quoted it from memory, it was probably an aphorism or a proverb. However, it held little meaning to Yumi, since this was her first time hearing it.

“Right now, I’m burning my bridges.”

Leaving Yumi with these words, Sachiko-sama turned the corner.

When she got home, Yumi looked it up in her English-Japanese dictionary.

– Burning one's bridges behind them.

Basically, it meant to commit yourself to a course of action which you couldn't turn back from.

Part 2.

Yumi parted company with Sachiko-sama, and when she arrived at the Rose Mansion the only people there to greet her were Shimako-san and Yoshino-san.

In other words, only the second-years were there.

“Oh, what happened to Noriko-chan?”

Yumi asked, the bag she had fetched from her classroom falling with a thud.

She already knew that Tōko was rehearsing for the drama club’s play. Tōko had said she would stop by when the rehearsal was finished, but Yumi had told her not to overexert herself.

“Noriko went to the office to borrow the yellow pages.”

“Yellow pages?”

“The florist we used last year has gone out of business, so we have to find another one.”

Yumi was asked if she had run into Noriko-chan, but she hadn’t seen her at all. Yumi shrugged, then sat down. Various documents were spread out across the table.

“Putting that aside. What happened with Sachiko-sama?”

Yoshino-san brought her chair around next to Yumi’s.

And just like that, work was momentarily suspended as they rushed into chat-time. Even Shimako-san put down her document and adopted a listening posture.

“What happened? Nothing much.”

“What do you mean, nothing much. She was calling you out in that letter.”

“Ahh, about that.”

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san looked exasperated after Yumi explained the reason behind that. Yumi would never say it, but she was wondering just what on earth those two were expecting.

“But surely Sachiko-sama had something in mind, since she asked you to meet her.”

“She said she wanted to see my face.”

On hearing that, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san looked at each other and said, “Mmm.”

“...That Sachiko-sama.”

“So I let her look at my face.”

That kind of reasoning would make Yumi blush and feel awkward even if she wasn’t talking about herself.

“And then?”

Yoshino-san lightly tapped Yumi on the shoulder, urging her to continue.

“Did she say what she was studying?”

“Sorry. I didn’t ask.”

“You forgot again!?”

While Yoshino-san was still gasping in shock, Yumi shook her head.

“Nope. I remembered, but I decided not to ask.”

“Why?”

This time it was Shimako-san posing the question.

“Sachiko-sama said she’d tell me eventually, so I’ll wait.”

“Heey.”

“You’re not concerned?”

Yumi stopped to ponder at this question from her close friend.

She would be lying if she said she wasn’t concerned.

Nor could she say that she wouldn’t worry no matter where Sachiko-sama went, or what she did. If they had been trapped by the same inability to understand each other’s feelings that they had during their troubles last year, then she would probably be badgering Sachiko-sama, trying to get information out of her.

“Well, it would just be to satisfy my own personal curiosity, so it’s okay, I guess.”

Regardless of whether or not Yumi knew about and agreed with what her onee-sama was doing, Yumi considered her onee-sama to be a reasonable person and was convinced there was no way she'd be involved in anything untoward. And since her onee-sama had said, 'For now, it's a secret,' that meant that at least there was a reason behind it.

"After all, when it comes time for me to know, I'm sure she'll leave an obvious sign that she wants to see me."

Yumi said, taking the letter of challenge from her pocket and waving it around.

And then.

"...Wonderful."

Shimako-san whispered.

"Huh?"

"Yumi-san, it's wonderful. That impression of solidness."

Again with the solid. Unlike Sachiko-sama, Shimako-san didn't push her in the shoulder, but she did half-rise from her chair, lean across the table and pat both of Yumi's hands.

Seated beside Yumi, Yoshino-san stuck a finger in her ear and tilted her head in an obvious display of boredom.

"For sure, it's the bulk of a heavyweight sumo wrestler. I wonder if it's the presence you gain upon becoming an onee-sama."

Yoshino-san's words were probably intended to be sarcastic or a backhanded compliment, but there was just a bit too much spin on it and it went sailing past Yumi. Instead, she seized upon a few of the phrases she heard.

First, solid. Then, the bulk of a sumo wrestler.

"I knew it, I am fat!?"

Yumi pinched at the area around her waist. As the dress wasn't tight around the stomach, it was possible that she was getting fat without realizing it.

"Still, her ditzy nature remains unchanged."

“Indeed.”

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san smiled at each other. Yumi could tell they were speaking figuratively, but she still couldn't work out how what they saw in her that was ‘solid.’

“Ahh, that's right.”

Yoshino-san clapped her hands.

“We can talk about it now that the first years aren't here. What are we going to do about ‘that’?”

“That?”

They were to discuss ‘that.’ However, the pronoun ‘that’ is mainly useful for its ability to refer to any number of things.

“When I said ‘that.’ I meant the talent show, the talent show.”

“Ahhh...”

If they were to give a name to the talent show, it would be ‘that.’ Last year, for the Rose's farewell party, the three of them had risked life and limb in putting on a performance for the amusement of the graduating seniors.

“If we plan on doing that again this year, we should indirectly let the first-years know about it.”

No high-school student would be able to perform a party trick on the spot if someone asked them to. Even if they did happen to know one, they probably wouldn't have the necessary props with them.

“But, you know.”

Yumi sought confirmation.

“We were tricked by Satō Sei-sama into practicing for it. That doesn't mean it has to be like that every year.”

“That's true.”

Shimako-san nodded in agreement.

Sachiko-sama's solo ballet performance and Rei-sama's one-handed apple crushing display were just things that Sei-sama had made up. Probably.

Last year had been an anomaly. So, what should they do this year? Should they return to the way things were, or continue to trial it for another year. It deserved some consideration. Depending on their choice, a talent show performed by the first-years could become the accepted custom.

Shimako-san didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about it.

"Currently there's only two first-years, and it would be a great burden to lay on them even if they didn't have anything else going on, don't you think? But Tōko-chan has her drama club commitments too. I wonder if making her practice a party performance at this busy time of year would be unfair."

"Sorry."

"My apologies."

Yoshino-san, who was still without a petite sœur, and Yumi, whose petite sœur was busy, both bowed their heads simultaneously. Shimako-san looked mortified and said, "That's not what I meant."

Still, Shimako-san had spoken truthfully. Last year, Yumi had overexerted herself and finally collapsed on the day before the party. Shimako-san and Yoshino-san wouldn't presume to raise this, but it was a bitter lesson they had all probably taken to heart.

Silence reigned for a while. The private farewell party, by itself, wasn't a lot of work, but before that was the 'Third-Years' Send Off.' While the three future Roses were the core of this effort, the first-years still had to act as their support. And since they had been first-years last year, they knew how much effort that was.

And even that was putting it lightly. For the first-years, it was brutal.

An odd atmosphere had settled around them. Their gazes shifted, as though searching for each others true intentions.

"I don't think we should perform again this year."

Finally, Shimako-san spoke, breaking the silence. In no time at all, Yoshino-san and Yumi both agreed with her.

“That’s true.”

It fell to them last year because they were the lowest on the totem pole. But now that they had petite sœurs of their own, nobody would want to do a magic act, or an impromptu traditional Japanese dance, or the loach scooping dance. After all, if their petite sœurs saw them performing such an act, then surely they would lose some of their dignity.

“What should we do if Rei-sama or Sachiko-sama requests a performance?”

If they ask, ‘What are you performing?’ Like Sei-sama did last year.

“They might. Last year’s performances were well received.”

In that case, it would be unfair not to tell the first-years about it in advance. The more you thought about it, the more confusing it became.

They were all busy. Yet when they weren’t working, it looked like they’d have this to worry about.

“Anyway, we can continue this discussion later.”

In the end, the question of the talent show was shelved without an agreement being reached.

Why?

Because the squeak-squeak sound of someone climbing the stairs floating into the second-floor room.

“I’m back.”

Noriko-chan cheerfully opened the biscuit door. Standing behind her was Tōko. However, neither of them were holding the yellow pages.

“Looking at the advertisements and addresses, we found a number of possible matches. After calling them to find out more, we think these two meet our requirements. They should be able to fit within our budget, and they can deliver if we pre-order.”

Noriko-chan reported, looking at her notebook. And then Tōko added:

“But since we’re dealing with flower arrangements, we shouldn’t make a decision until we’ve seen how they handle the flowers and what the store’s atmosphere is like. If you’d like, Noriko-chan and I can go and check them out on our way home –”

So that’s why they took so long.

It looked as though their talented petite sœurs had gone ahead and finished this job for them.

Part 3.

Friday.

Sachiko-sama didn't come to school today.

Part 4.

Saturday.

Sachiko-sama was standing outside the second-year pine classroom when Yumi arrived at school. Who knows how long Sachiko-sama had been waiting, but when she saw Yumi's face she suppressed a giggle and walked over to her.

Something good had obviously happened to Sachiko-sama, because she omitted the standard greeting of 'Gokigenyou.'

"I just thought of this yesterday, and I wanted to hear your opinion on it, Yumi."

It was about their date at the amusement park.

"Ahh."

Yumi's initial reaction upon hearing the request was surprise, but she started to warm to the idea as Sachiko-sama continued to talk.

"Understood. I'll ask them."

This wasn't something that she could agree to on her own. Putting this on hold for now, Yumi agreed to have a response for Sachiko-sama by Monday.

"Really? I'll leave it to you then."

"I think it'll be okay. Or I'll find a way to make it work."

Seeing her onee-sama looking so excited, like an elementary school student on the day before an excursion, made Yumi want to pitch in and help.

"You can't force them."

Even as this warning was coming from her mouth, Sachiko-sama's expression said that a little bit of arm-twisting would be okay.

"Is this because of your revenge?"

Perhaps this was a necessary part of her preparation itself.

"Could be."

Sachiko-sama walked back down the corridor in a cheerful mood, feeling better now that she had said what she wanted to say.

"Ah. I forgot to ask her about her absence yesterday."

Yumi thought, as she watched Sachiko-sama step lightly down the corridor, almost as though she were dancing.

There was no way Sachiko-sama had spent the entire day yesterday thinking about their date at the amusement park, right?

Santa's Refreshments

Part 1.

On Monday morning, after changing into her indoor shoes, Yumi took a slight detour and made her way over to the third-years' shoe boxes. She had arrived at school earlier than usual, but only by a little bit. There were other students all around her, but everyone was moving at a leisurely pace so there was no need to worry about bumping into anyone. It wasn't empty, but it was quiet.

(Excuse me.)

She opened that familiar lid in the third-year pine area. Inside the shoe box, the left and right indoor shoes were neatly arranged.

(Okay.)

Her onee-sama had not yet arrived. Whatever had led to her waiting outside Yumi's classroom on Saturday didn't seem to have happened today.

Yumi took a piece of paper from her pocket and left it on top of Sachiko-sama's indoor shoes. When she closed the lid, it caused a slight puff of wind. Concerned, Yumi opened the lid once more and saw that the letter had shifted slightly from its former position. The paper was light, so it didn't take much wind to affect it. If the lid were opened or closed enthusiastically, then the paper might just fly away to some unknown location.

Reconsidering, Yumi put the piece of paper inside the right shoe. This way, there was no need to worry about it being blown away by a slight breeze.

(That's better.)

This time around, Yumi shut the lid and headed to her classroom.

"Gokigenyou, Yumi-san."

Yumi was pounced upon as soon as she entered the hallway. Tapping her on the shoulder from behind was the president of the arts club.

“I’m glad I ran into you. It’s about the signboard for the ‘Third-Years’ Send-off.’ When I got a quote for the paint, they said they probably didn’t have enough in stock. I asked them to put in an urgent order, but it looks like they won’t get any until tomorrow evening, which means we probably won’t be able to get our hands on it until Thursday.”

Yumi listened as they walked. She suddenly recalled a scene from about a year ago, with this girl eating bread crusts as she sketched with charcoal.

“Will you have it done by Friday?”

“We will. We’ll finish painting on Thursday, so by Friday it should have dried completely and be safe to move.”

“Roger that.”

Yumi gave the thumbs-up. Their schedule had a little bit of slack in it. They seemed to have a realistic outlook, so it would probably be okay.

They parted ways at the arts club’s president’s classroom.

“As an apology for being late, we’ll bring it around to the Rose Mansion ourselves.”

The voice called out to Yumi as she was disappearing down the corridor, and she stopped and turned around. She brought her empty right-hand up to the side of her cheek to amplify her voice and called out:

“Thanks, that’ll be really helpful.”

It looked like today was going to be another busy day.

Part 2.

Lunchtime.

While waiting behind the Rose Mansion, Yumi saw Sachiko-sama walking through the courtyard and waved at her, saying, “Over here.”

“Gokigenyou, Yumi. By the way, what is it that’s ‘over here?’”

“Huh?”

What’s over here? In this case, the subject of the sentence was “I” so Yumi had shortened the sentence “I’m over here” to “Over here.”

“Umm, onee-sama. Didn’t you come here to meet me...?”

“Oh?”

(– That response would seem to indicate a ‘no’ then.)

If she had come here to see Yumi, then she certainly wouldn’t have asked the question about what was over here.

“You didn’t read my letter?”

Yumi had suspected that she would be busy today, so she’d left the letter so there was no chance of them missing each other. It would have been better to visit Sachiko-sama in her third-year classroom during one of their breaks between classes, but people were always asking her questions about the third-years’ send-off while she was in her classroom or walking down the corridors, so she didn’t have any time to do her own errands during those breaks. So, as rude as it may have been, she left a note for her onee-sama asking to meet.

“Letter?”

Shaking her head. So then it was just a coincidence that Sachiko-sama happened to be walking past here? Then you’d have to say it was lucky. But was that really the case? It just seemed too good to be true.

“A letter from you, Yumi? Where did you put it?”

“In the shoe racks... In your locker... Inside your indoor shoes.”

“Inside my indoor shoes? Oh, I wonder how I didn’t notice it. Perhaps it’s still inside my shoe.”

“Well, I don’t really think that’s likely.”

Even though it had been a light piece of paper, Yumi had folded it in four. At that level of thickness it would definitely have been noticeable when wearing the shoes, and would probably have made a rustling sound as well. Despite this, Sachiko-sama placed one hand on the wall, lifted her left foot and slid her index finger into the back of her left shoe, taking it off.

And then.

“Ah.”

A folded piece of paper fell out.

However, watching this chain of events unfold, Yumi knew something was up.

“Onee-sama. I put the letter in your right shoe.”

Yumi ventured timidly. Even if Sachiko-sama hadn’t noticed when she put her shoes on, why would it have changed placed?

Sachiko-sama grinned.

“What a relief. It looks like you’ve still got some of your wits about you.”

“Hey-.”

It appeared that Sachiko-sama was just testing her, for some reason. Well, at least it looked as though Yumi got the right answer.

“What do you mean? My brain’s still working fine, right?”

“I said you still had some of your wits about you.”

Sachiko-sama held out the letter, urging Yumi to read it. Opening the paper that still retained the warmth from Sachiko-sama’s heel, Yumi saw the request for a meeting written in her fairly ordinary looking handwriting.

“Which part do you think is strange?”

“Have a closer look.”

Onee-sama,

During the lunch break, I'll be waiting for you behind the Rice Mansion.

~Yumi.

Sachiko-sama pointed to a spot on the paper.

“Ahh.”

She'd written the ‘Rice Mansion,’ instead of the ‘Rose Mansion.’ A building made out of rice? In that case, it was only natural that her onee-sama would think she was going senile.

“Were you feeling tired?”

Yumi briskly shook her head.

“What probably happened was, I started thinking about what was in my lunchbox after I wrote ‘lunch.’”

It wasn't an explanation she was particularly proud of, but Yumi didn't want to let that misunderstanding continue. She'd written the letter first thing this morning, and was still yet to do any homework or Yamayurikai work today. So, if she had been tired, it wasn't because of either of those things.

“Then that's fine. You don't want to push yourself too hard.”

“Okay.”

Her onee-sama turned to her and gave her the kind of look you would use when admonishing a baby, at which point Yumi finally turned an embarrassed red.

“What are you smiling about, Yumi?”

There was no way that Yumi could say she was overjoyed that her onee-sama was concerned about her, so she turned away. There was some work she really had to do today, so that it didn't become a huge problem in the future.

Just as Yumi was about to leave her and enter the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama called out, “Wait.”

“You're still not thinking straight. Didn't you call me out here so that you could give me an answer to my question from Saturday?”

“Ah. That’s right.”

So it wasn’t a matter of being tired, or overexerting herself – Yumi was just naturally absentminded.

“The answer is ‘okay.’”

Yumi stopped, turned around, and used her arms to form a circle over her head.

“Thank-you for your efforts.”

In return, her onee-sama made a small circle using her thumb and index finger.

That small circle was enough to fill a petite sœur full of energy.

Part 3.

There was a guest waiting for Yumi in the Rose (not Rice) Mansion.

“Gokigenyou, Yumi-san.”

Her exams were over and Tsukiyama Minako-sama was coming back to life, like an animal waking from its winter hibernation.

“Go – gokigenyou.”

Yumi studied Tōko’s face to try and determine what was going on as she took a seat beside her. Their guest was still standing, but that wasn’t a problem. Noriko-chan, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san were all in the room. It was inconceivable that no-one had offered her a chair already, so Minako-sama was probably standing because she wanted to.

“What’s the matter?”

Tōko was silently working on something, so Yumi asked Shimako-san who was closest to her on the other side.

“That’s...”

Mindful of Minako-sama’s presence, Shimako-san spoke softly. To summarize, Minako-sama had come to the Rose Mansion because she had a job for Tōko and was waiting for Tōko to finish because she wanted it as soon as possible.

“And then.”

Shimako-san half-rose from her seat and whispered in Yumi’s ear, being mindful of Tōko.

“Tōko-chan said she shouldn’t just suddenly ask for this, and they had a bit of a quarrel. But in the end...”

Apparently Minako-sama had used her position as a senior to twist Tōko’s arm.

Yumi peered at Tōko’s hands to try and determine what kind of work she was doing. Then, without staying her hand, Tōko said:

“I’m proofreading for the Lillian Kawaraban.”

This week's edition was the special feature on the dates that the Valentine's Day event winners had with the next Roses. Tōko was checking over the report that she had submitted and making corrections on the test print with a red pen. Yumi had done a similar thing last week, however unlike the extra edition that contained hardly any writing, it looked like this was taking somewhat longer.

“Hey, what are you going to do?”

Yoshino-san inquired, from the seat opposite.

“There's not a lot I can do.”

If Yumi had been here while they were having their dispute then perhaps she could have done more, but now that Tōko had already started working it was a bit late for her to be butting in.

Yumi opened her lunch-box and started to eat. Noriko-chan poured her a cup of tea and brought it over. Minako-sama was also offered tea, but she declined, saying she wasn't going to be staying long.

Ordinarily, all visitors to the Rose Mansion were offered tea, however they had decided to suspend that practice for this week as they expected there would be a large number of students coming and going. But they would still make the offer if they themselves were drinking tea, and if requested would of course serve their guests.

Just as Yumi was finishing her lunch, Tōko stood up beside her.

“Here. It's done.”

Tōko walked over to where Minako-sama was standing and gave her the Lillian Kawaraban test print. Always the actress. Her face didn't show what was in her heart. Knowing that she was really sulking just made it all the more frightening.

Yumi closed her lunch-box and stood up. Ready to support Tōko, just in case. Yumi felt that, as Tōko's grande sœur, she couldn't let this go unacknowledged.

“I'm so sorry to have made you wait.”

“Not at all, I apologize for rushing you.”

Tōko then said, “Excuse me,” and walked away, leaving Yumi standing there. Tōko then started heartily biting into her half-eaten rice balls, although it was unclear whether she was trying to insinuate something or just hungry.

“Still, for a third-year to come all the way out here, Minako-sama...”

It would be reading too much into this statement to interpret it as sarcasm, as in, “Have your juniors turned you into their errand girl?” Unfortunately, Yumi didn’t have that sort of skill on tap, so the only meaning was what the words themselves contained. Yumi had thought that Minako-sama’s involvement in last week’s extra edition was some kind of exception, but perhaps she was still fully participating in all newspaper club activities.

“My juniors are all busy, so I volunteered to help. Or, should I say, I talked them in to letting me do this.”

So it appears that this Tsukiyama Minako-sama isn’t sensitive to such barbs, for she took it as stated and provided a normal answer. Peace and tranquility. Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan had both pricked their ears up, their hearts racing, but, of course, they went unnoticed.

“I want to be part of the Lillian Kawaraban, in whatever way I can.”

Minako-sama spoke those words with pride, and there was something to admire about her unfaltering dedication to the school newspaper.

Having no reason to stay now that she had received the corrections to the test print, Minako-sama farewelled everyone with a, “Sorry for bothering you,” and walked towards the exit. Thinking she should see her off, Yumi followed Minako-sama, but was stopped at the doorway by Minako-sama saying, “Here will be fine.”

“Anyway, hey, did you hear?”

Minako-sama said, with her hand still on the doorknob, as though she had just remembered something.

“Sachiko-san’s completely stopped her eccentric behavior.”

“Eccentric...”

Is that really the kind of word you’d use to describe someone who doesn’t usually cram for exams working through a book of problems?

“So, what was it all about?”

Minako-sama leaned up against her.

“I told you, I don’t know.”

Yumi herself had never actually seen Sachiko-sama while she was apparently cramming for an exam. So, now that she heard that Sachiko-sama had suddenly stopped, it made her doubt the validity of the earlier rumors entirely.

“At any rate, it doesn’t concern me.”

Yumi bundled Minako-sama out the door, sending her off with, “That’s enough for today.” Though she heard Minako-sama say, “Can’t you do something about it?” Yumi kept pulling on the door knob so that Minako-sama couldn’t open it, and eventually she heard the sounds of someone descending the stairs. Perhaps she had remembered that she didn’t have any time to waste.

Tōko watched carefully as Yumi returned to her seat, relieved.

“Rosa Chinensis’ eccentricities, do they have anything to do with Suguru onii-sama?”

That was a curious question to ask.

“Why would you mention Kashiwagi-san?”

It seemed quite a leap. After all, Minako-sama had said ‘Sachiko-san’ but she hadn’t mentioned ‘Kashiwagi-san’ at all.

“It might be unrelated, but I heard that, recently, Suguru onii-sama has been going over to the Ogasawara house every day.”

“Every day? I wonder what for.”

Still, that’s what you’d expect from a blood relative. Tōko heard conversations that Yumi wasn’t even aware of.

“I don’t know. But perhaps he has some business with Sachiko-sama’s father or grandfather that requires a daily visit.”

“Well, who knows.”

Still, there was a chance that he was going there to see Sachiko-sama. Well, it felt like that was actually the most likely possibility.

Sachiko-sama had said she had things to attend to, and then went home early every day. Yumi hadn’t even imagined that it was because she had an appointment with Kashiwagi-san.

“Hmmmm.”

Yumi didn’t know the answer. If Tōko, who just gave this report, didn’t know, then Yumi didn’t know either. And if Yumi didn’t know, then chances are no-one else here knew either. All they could do was look at each other and think about it, although that felt like a waste of time.

And then.

“Excuse me. I’m from the story-telling club –”

“I’m from the candy-making club –”

They had to deal with a steady stream of visitors like these, and didn’t have any spare time to dwell on the matter.

Part 4.

Tuesday.

All the exhibition space, including the auditorium entrance, the lobby and the path leading there, had been divided into areas for each of the groups participating, and all group representatives had been notified.

The program of events had also been decided, taking into account the genres, running time and sets used in the performances, and the representatives of groups taking part had likewise been notified.

Even so, some groups had come forth because they found a flaw in the arrangements or were otherwise dissatisfied with them, so you couldn't yet call it a success. These groups had been given a one day extension, until Wednesday, during which their objections would be heard and, potentially, acted upon. It was the sort of job that required a lot of nerve and sensitivity.

"I was told that the photography club and the flower arranging club wanted to trade places."

Shimako-san said. It sounded like the two club presidents had come to the Rose Mansion straight after school had finished.

"If they both agree to it, it should be fine. Did they give a reason why?"

Yumi asked, putting her bag down. She was a bit late because three girls had called out to her on the way here, and she'd had four conversations.

"Apparently there's an air-conditioning vent here."

Shimako-san said, tapping on a specific part of their rough sketch of the auditorium. Yumi and Yoshino-san gathered around to have a look.

"They didn't think it would make that much of a difference to their display, but since they have an arrangement of live flowers, they'd prefer to avoid that location. The photography club was fine with it because it gave them a little bit more space."

Interesting. They had discussed proximity to fresh water when deciding where to put the flower club, but hadn't even considered the air-conditioning vents. Quickly, they changed the group names in their draft pamphlet.

"The judo club asked what they were supposed to do about tatami mats for the stage."

It looked like Yoshino-san had picked up some extra work on her way over here as well.

"I wonder what they did last year. Did they bring them from the martial arts building?"

"I think they might have used ones from the cellar storehouse due to carrying problems"

Shimako-san muttered, looking through the notes from last year. After all, if they took the mats from the martial arts building to the auditorium, then the judo club wouldn't be able to practice. So by not using the tatami mats from the martial arts building, they could get them earlier.

"The tatami mats from the cellar warehouse, huh? Then they'll have to get permission to take them. Umm, I'm sure there's a form for that somewhere around here."

"Ahh, didn't the Koto music club get permission to use those."

Yumi raised her finger, remembering.

"I see. In that case, let's suggest that the two groups work together. There's only one stage, so there's no need for both groups to prepare it. And with more people involved, there's less for each person to carry."

After listening to the three second-years speak, Tōko raised her hand.

"I'll go and tell them."

"Right now?"

Then Noriko-chan spoke, before Tōko had a chance to answer the question.

“I’ll go with her. Then on the way back, we can call the flower shop to confirm the order. Oh, and we can stop by the art club while we’ve got the chance, to see if their paint has arrived.”

The pair made a break for the door without waiting for a response, so Yumi had to hastily call them to a stop.

“Wait.”

Their juniors were attentive to all kinds of small details, and completely trustworthy. Still, the way they were trying their hardest at everything reminded Yumi of how she had been last year.

“I know you’re worried about the signboard, but I think we can trust the arts club with that.”

Yoshino-san nodded in agreement, before adding:

“As for the tatami mats, I’m attending a meeting with the sports clubs tomorrow, so I’ll ask the judo club’s president then. And Shimako-san’s in the same class as the Koto music club’s president, so she can ask her. Is that okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

The goal was to utilize everyone intelligently. If there’s someone appropriate for the task, then it’s better to ask them directly. The key phrase was, “Don’t overdo it.”

“So you see, all we’d like you two to do is call the florist.”

“Okay.”

They seemed a tad dissatisfied, but they were smart so they quickly accepted what was happening and left. While watching through the window as the two first-years departed, Yumi mumbled:

“Last year my onee-sama said things like, ‘You girls are such a great help.’ I share her sentiments but I don’t want a repeat of last year.”

“Indeed.”

Shimako-san agreed, while Yoshino-san had a grim look on her face.

“I’m sorry. Your two petite sœurs are forced to do the work of my petite sœur.”

Arima Nana-chan, Yoshino-san’s favorite amongst the younger girls, was in her third year of middle school. No matter how much Yoshino-san wanted to make Nana-chan her petite sœur, it wouldn’t happen until April.

“Oh yeah, is Nana-chan coming to the farewell party?”

“She won’t be coming. I didn’t ask her.”

“Oh, why not? You invited her to the Christmas party.”

Under attack from her two close friends, Yoshino-san scratched her head, annoyed.

“Back then, I figured it would be okay because Tsutako-san was invited to the party. And so was Tōko-chan, even though she wasn’t your petite sœur then, and Kanako-chan.”

But the Roses farewell party was just for sœurs. And since Nana-chan was not yet her sœur, Yoshino-san had decided that it would be inappropriate for her to participate.

“Plus, the farewell party’s all about the third-years.”

Yoshino-san seemed to have mixed feelings about that.

Part 5.

Wednesday.

The Lillian Kawaraban's 'Valentines Day Date' special edition was published.

They were quite busy, as usual, but the time spent reading the articles was like a dose of refreshing tonic.

The trio all had their dates with the treasure hunt winners on the same day. They had each been intentionally vague about what they did on their dates, so reading through the articles was something of a revelation.

The newspaper club's Mami-san and her petite sœur made an appearance in Yoshino-san and Tanuma Chisato-san's report, while Igawa Ami-san and Shimako-san's report included appearances from Ami-san's classmates and the photography club's Tsutako-san and Shōko-chan. Both reports conveyed a sense of liveliness and fun. In contrast, when they read Tōko's report, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san expressed amazement at how far they were able to go using the allocated funds.

They had an enjoyable chat about the Lillian Kawaraban and blew away their fatigue. Then they were able to move on to their next task with a new found energy.

After school, Yoshino-san went to the sports club meeting and took a few new tasks home with her as souvenirs.

Part 6.

Thursday.

They found a typo in the printed programs, and spent their lunch time affixing corrective stickers over the top of it. They had all reviewed the program prior to printing, but the typo still managed to slip in, so perhaps they were getting a little bit worn-out.

They had expected this task to drag on, but they sang as they worked and it took surprisingly little time to correct.

After school, Yoshino-san and Yumi went to the flower arranging club to borrow a vase for the roses. Noriko-chan volunteered because it was manual labor, but it was easier for Yumi and Yoshino-san to do it, as they had learned the trick to carrying the vase last year. Anyway, the vase was big, like a brazier.

Tōko was absent, having her final dress rehearsal.

Even so, their work proceeded smoothly.

Part 7.

Friday.

The arts club delivered the signboard during the lunch break, just as they had promised.

Last year's sign had been written as though advertising a sumo wrestling tournament, while this year's was written as though it were for a Kabuki play. Looking at it, you expected to see the names of some famous actors like Nakamura, Bandou or Ichikawa written on the sign.

"At first glance, it looks black, right?"

The president of the arts club said, pointing at the lettering. The two club members who had carried the signboard to the Rose Mansion had left it outside, to catch the sun's rays.

Yumi, who had come outside to receive the signboard, said, "Yep," and nodded her head in agreement, since it certainly looked black to her. Then she was asked once more:

"Even when you look closely, it looks black, right?"

"It's not?"

Tōko and Noriko-chan had accompanied Yumi outside and they both shook their head, unable to see anything other than black writing.

"I thought you'd say that. Ta-dah."

The arts club president held up a piece of black imitation vellum. It was about the size of a paperback. She then brought the vellum close to where 'Graduating students farewell party' was written –

"Ooooh."

Isn't that strange. When viewed alongside something that was genuinely black, it was immediately obvious that the lettering was slightly different. It was a very dark purplish blue.

"It takes someone with a great color sense to come up with such a nice result."

The arts club president responded to this compliment by fishing for compliments by good-naturedly saying, "Praise me more."

“Very stylish.”

“One more.”

“Wait, best in all Japan.”

“Okaaay, take it, you thieves.”

Finally, there was a smattering of applause from the three girls from the Rose Mansion and the three girls from the arts club, and the handover was completed. The president of the arts club was as funny a person as ever.

In the evening, Noriko-chan and Tōko went to the main gates to receive the delivery of 200 roses from the florist. But when they returned, they weren't just carrying flowers.

“What's this?”

Yumi asked Noriko-chan, after spotting the plastic bag with a pharmacy's logo on it that contained a number of small, thin boxes. Tōko was currently busy placing the flowers into water-filled buckets. The flowers were red, white, yellow and salmon pink. Fifty flowers each of the four different colors.

“It's a present from a kind Santa.”

Noriko-chan said, as though reciting from a textbook.

“Huh?”

“– is what I was told to say.”

By the so-called kind Santa.

Still, this Santa seemed quite eccentric. Randomly appearing in the middle of March and giving an inappropriate gift to girls carrying flowers. And since Santa normally was kind anyway, he wouldn't refer to himself as a ‘kind Santa.’

“It was Sei-sama, right?”

That gave them these gifts.

“Correct. It was pretty easy to figure out.”

“Yeah.”

Accepting the plastic bag from Noriko-chan, Yumi took the small, gold boxes out of the plastic bag and lined them up on the table. They were, unmistakeably, energy drinks. Ten of them, in all.

Now's not the time to be feeling tired. Yumi could just picture Sei-sama saying that to them.

"What's this, Sei-sama gave us a supply of energy drinks?"

"I haven't seen these ones before."

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san took a break from their work and came over to have a look.

In general, high school students didn't have much contact with energy drinks. A quick survey showed that only Yumi and Noriko-chan had tried them before.

"It looks like it has alcohol in it, so I wonder if it's okay for us to drink."

Shimako-san murmured, reading the list of ingredients.

"But, see, it says here 'suitable for people 15 years and over.'"

"All those over the age of 15 –"

Yoshino-san called out, and everyone responded by saying 'Here' and raising their hand. All present were apparently qualified to drink these.

Still, no-one reached out for a drink. The hesitation arose because taking one would mean admitting that you were tired.

In the middle of that.

"I shall drink one of these."

Jumping in at the deep end, Shimako-san opened one of the boxes with a determined look on her face. Even though it seemed like a fairly trivial matter, it probably still required a certain amount of determination to taste some (completely unknown) new drink.

However, inside the box there was a tray that protected the bottle, and the bottle came with a straw already attached to the mouth, but wrapped in plastic. Since Shimako-san hadn't encountered anything like this before, she wasn't going about opening the bottle in a particularly efficient manner.

“Here, onee-sama.”

Noriko-chan handed a completed bottle to Shimako-san, who was still fighting hard. Then she took Shimako-san’s bottle and finished opening it.

“This is a gift from onee-sama’s onee-sama, right?”

“Yes.”

Shimako-san nodded. She must have wanted to receive Sei-sama’s feelings. Through her stomach.

“Oh well. I’m not really all that tired...”

Yoshino-san opened a box as well. Followed by Yumi and Tōko.

Shimako-san and Noriko-chan waited for them, so they all said, “Cheers,” and clinked their bottles together before drinking.

It was an anticipatory celebration. Of all they had done. And of what was to come tomorrow.

Feeling slightly flushed and tingly, the five girls walked abreast along the path lined with ginkgo trees.

“You know, my father drinks this sort of thing and says that it relaxes him. I wonder what the real story is.”

Yoshino-san muttered, taking one of the empty cans out of the shopping bag.

“He keeps drinking them, even though they don’t have any effect?”

Surely he wouldn’t go out of his way to buy them if he thought they were having no effect whatsoever.

“But if you kept drinking this kind of thing, your body would get used to it and it wouldn’t have as much effect, right?”

After hearing Tōko’s theory, Noriko-chan jumped on board too.

“And then you have to find something stronger – that kind of thing?”

“Yeah.”

The Yamayurikai members had considered it improper to leave the empties from their energy drink party lying around, so had gathered them up to take home and dispose of. Yoshino-san had been asked to take them home, as she lived the closest to school.

The five untouched boxes had been left in the Rose Mansion with a label that read, ‘Refreshments from Satō Sei-sama.’ The use-by-date printed on the boxes was November of the following year, so there was bound to be another time when they all were busy and feeling tired before then. Like, for example, the school festival, or next year’s ‘third-years’ send-off.’

“It tasted like the cough-syrup I used to have as a child.”

Shimako-san smiled, reminiscing. Yumi remembered the cough-syrup as bitter medicine, so was surprised at how easily Shimako-san seemed to have drunk it.

“Didn’t you think it tasted more like caramel pudding?”

“I’m not sure –”

Yumi was the only one not to endorse Yoshino-san’s opinion.

“I thought it tasted more like my grandfather’s medicinal alcohol.”

“Do you drink that often?”

They had reached the school gates and, after a good laugh, they waved goodbye and went their separate ways.

It may just have been Yumi’s imagination, but everyone seemed a little bit giddy. Even though they hadn’t thought they were tired, perhaps some fatigue had set in that they weren’t aware of, and the energy drinks had cleared that away.

Unfortunately, the energy drink didn’t have the power to make you remember things you had forgotten. Still, it was surely better to remain oblivious and sleep soundly, than to remember it now, when it was probably too late.

The Miracle Worker

Part 1.

Contrary to the expectations that Yumi had held when she left her house about 30 minutes earlier than usual, the bus she caught was quite crowded.

Not only that, today was the day of the third-years' send-off.

The entire four hours usually reserved for Saturday classes had been allocated to the send-off.

(Hmm.)

Yumi surveyed her fellow early-birds as she held on to a strap and swayed back and forth with everyone else. Since they wouldn't need their textbooks or notebooks, only a handful of students were carrying their school bags. Consequently, you may expect there would be a bit more room inside the bus, but that was not the case. Instead, most people were carrying things like sports bags, or paper bags, or packages wrapped in cloth – everything except a school bag, which contributed to the claustrophobic feeling.

Almost all of the students arriving early were either performing in the third-years' send-off, or exhibiting something they had made. Therefore, it stood to reason that they would have a lot of luggage. Squeezed amongst them were costumes, props, and exhibition pieces that had finally been finished.

(Come to think of it, I was like that last year.)

Last year Yumi had destroyed her health on the day before the third-years' send-off, so she hadn't caught a bus 30 minutes earlier than usual, but she had carried a paper bag holding a cloth-wrapped package to school. Of course, that wasn't for the third-years' send-off, but for the Roses' farewell party which was held after it.

(For the Roses' farewell party...)

After thinking that much, Yumi suddenly remembered. In fact, she may have even cried out in surprise. One of the students standing nearby looked doubtfully in her direction.

(Damn it. I completely forgot!)

What she had forgotten to do was to talk to Tōko and Noriko-chan about the party performances.

(No, wait.)

Hadn't they decided not to tell them about it? Yumi reconsidered. It seemed like they had decided that it would be bad to make the first-years worry about it, since they were already trying their hardest. But was that where the conversation had ended?

(That's right.)

Someone said that the third-years might suddenly request a performance. And they'd thought it would be unfair on the first-years to make them perform without any warning.

(So what happened after that?)

The first-years had returned, and the conversation was shelved –

After that, they'd completely forgotten about it.

(Ohhhh. Really!?)

It seemed unbelievable that they would have done that. Had they really forgotten? Or had Yumi purged that memory to help her cope. She wracked her brain trying to reel in any additional memories, but there was absolutely nothing after the shelving of the conversation.

(What should I do? No matter how talented Noriko-chan and Tōko are, telling them today and expecting them to perform on the same day is just impossible.)

The blood rushed to Yumi's head, possibly aided by the overcrowding in the bus.

(Calm down.)

At any rate, she had to calm down first.

Panicking wasn't going to help her come up with a plan. First of all, she should go to the Rose Mansion and discuss this with Shimako-san and Yoshino-san. If they put their minds together, they should be able to come up with a plan.

After finally getting off the bus at Lillian's, Yumi was taking a deep breath of fresh air when she was tapped on the shoulder.

"Onee-sama."

Obviously, the only one who would call Yumi that was Tōko.

(Aaargh, it's her.)

Controlling her impulse to flee, Yumi turned around. Then.

(...Huh?)

Something was odd. There was no doubting that it was Tōko standing before her, but there was something about her that was different to usual.

"I saw you getting on the same bus as me, onee-sama, but we were a fair way apart so I didn't call out to you."

Then, finally noticing the look on Yumi's face, Tōko said, "Ahh," and pushed her hair back behind her ears.

"This?"

That.

"Right. That, your hair."

Yumi pointed.

Tōko's trademark hairstyle, the two vertical rolls, or drills, or cones, or spirals, were not there. Well, even if the hair rolls weren't there, it wasn't as though the hair itself had gone away.

"I didn't coil it this morning."

Right. That.

"Since my character in today's play has her hair down."

She had changed her hairstyle because of the character she's playing. Well, that made sense. Actually, Tōko had changed her hairstyle for the school festival play too. But, back then, it had been a part of her costume, so was easier to accept. Seeing Tōko wearing her school uniform without her vertical rolls, however, was like looking at a completely different person.

Tōko spoke next:

“Shouldn’t we be going soon?”

“Huh?”

“That’s a surprise. It seems kind of a waste to go to all the trouble of arriving early only to spend that time standing around talking at the bus stop.”

Hearing this, Yumi looked around and saw that the students that had been on the bus with her were no longer around. Looking up at the pedestrian bridge, there was a line of girls clad in blackish school uniforms. If Yumi hadn’t been surprised by Tōko’s hairdo, they would probably be a part of that queue.

Tōko walked off, so Yumi followed her. Tōko would probably be angry if she found out, but Yumi was intrigued by her unusual appearance.

Tōko’s straight hair swayed across her back. It wasn’t as long as Yoshino-san or Sachiko-sama’s, but about the same length as Shimako-san’s. The hair that she usually coiled up was surprisingly long when let down. That may have been common knowledge, but it was impressive to see it first-hand.

Tōko was also carrying a large bag. It was a black, nylon overnight bag, the kind of bag you’d use when going on holidays. The zipper running down the middle was firmly closed, so there was no way of knowing what was inside. Probably her costume or some props for the play. It looked quite heavy.

Part 2.

They went straight to the Rose Mansion, without stopping by their classrooms.

Even though there weren't any classes today they would still have homeroom and morning prayers as usual, however Yumi expected to spend her time prior to homeroom carrying things, like the signboard, to the assembly hall.

"Can you just give me a minute?"

Tōko entered the storeroom on the first floor of the Rose Mansion carrying the heavy bag she had brought from home. She emerged from the storeroom with Noriko-chan beside her, looking curiously at her hairstyle.

"I suppose it's going to be like this all day today."

As predicted, Tōko got the same response from Shimako-san and Yoshino-san when she arrived on the second floor. She'd probably get the same treatment from the first year camellia class too.

Now that the five Yamayurikai members were all present, they carried the signboard entrusted to them by the arts club, the vase they had borrowed from the flower arranging club and all the roses over to the auditorium. After placing the signboard outside and arranging the flowers and the vase just inside the entrance, they did a final check, adjusting the arrangements and the lighting slightly.

Behind and to the sides of the stage, students were holding desks, tatami mats and koto instruments, waiting for their turn.

"Ahh ahh. One, two. One, two."

The girl from the broadcasting club doing the mic check bowed when she saw the Yamayurikai members appear in the guest seating area.

The preparations were proceeding steadily. Yumi and the rest of the Yamayurikai left the auditorium for now.

It would be okay.

They would definitely see this through.

Because they were all doing this to show their onee-samas that they weren't dependent on the third-years. That they could prepare this all by themselves. Of course it was going to be a success.

Those were the common thoughts of all the first- and second-years participating in the third-years' send-off.

"Well, then. See you at the auditorium after homeroom."

Upon returning to the Rose Mansion, they formed a circle. They probably wouldn't all be together again prior to the assembly.

"Let's give it our all."

They put their hands together in the center of the circle and gave a cheer before dissolving.

Before leaving the Rose Mansion, Tōko fetched the bag she had left in the first floor storeroom.

(Oh?)

Maybe Yumi was just imagining it, but the bag looked smaller and lighter than it had before.

Part 3.

Now that the ceremony had begun, time seemed to fly by.

After all, as organizers they were only required to give the opening and closing addresses, barring some terrible accident. Still, it's not like they could kick back and watch the show – they were on standby behind the audience seating and to the side of the stage, making the day shine by ensuring that things went smoothly and nothing went wrong. Basically, it was good that their turn didn't come.

So, even though Yumi's class had a seat for her, she didn't sit down at all.

“You don't have to save a seat for me.”

Yumi had told her classmates, but they had all responded with, “Come and sit with us, just for a little while,” and reserved two aisle seats for Yumi and Yoshino-san. Looking around, it seemed the second-year wisteria class and the first-year camellia class had done the same thing, saving seats for their hardworking classmates. Even though they knew it was probably futile. Still, Yumi appreciated the gesture.

Off to the side of the stage, Yumi looked at the monitor that was showing the audience. Sachiko-sama was visible at the front of the third-years' section. On stage, the story-telling club were on to the final part of their performance. Sachiko-sama was smiling in response to their bizarre acrostic based on the letters of ‘Lillian’.

(I'm glad.)

Sachiko-sama seemed to be truly enjoying herself. They had exchanged a few words at the entrance, just as the third-years' were being welcomed. Sachiko-sama had encouraged her, saying, “Best of luck to you.” Yumi then said, “I hope you enjoy it,” to which Sachiko-sama responded, “I plan to,” and that's all that was said.

Alright, now that the story telling club had finished, the judo club, kendo club and karate club were preparing for their demonstration.

The scripture reading club was literally performing a scripture reading in front of the curtain while the set was being changed. Behind the curtain, the members of the story telling club collected their floor pillows and cleared the stage, then the judo club laid their tatami mats down on the stage.

“Yumi-san.”

Yumi turned around on hearing her name, and standing there in her kendo gear was Yoshino-san.

“Sorry I had to leave me post. When this is over, I’ll take your spot.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Yumi urged Yoshino-san not to worry about it, and instead focus on her performance. Club activities would always eat into their Yamayurikai work, even at the best of times.

“Hehehe.”

Poking out her tongue, Yoshino-san ran off to rejoin the other kendo club members. She had her shinai but wasn’t wearing the protective armor. The kimono’s collar matched the hakama perfectly. She looked like a wonderful swordsman.

(Oops, sorry, meant to say a samurai.)

However, just as Yumi was revising her opinion.

“No, Yoshino-san. You’re supposed to be over here.”

Tanuma Chisato-san called out from the other side of the stage. The curtain had already started rising, so the audience probably saw Yoshino-san’s legs as she ran from stage right to stage left. Yumi thought the audience probably wouldn’t be able to tell who it was, though, since they didn’t see Yoshino-san’s face. However, the people she could see did seem to know who it was, even though they hadn’t seen her face. As for how they knew, it was obvious just by looking at Rei-sama as she sat amongst the third-years.

Yumi knew absolutely nothing about martial arts. Still, the displays of judo, kendo and karate were beautiful, like dances. Did Yoshino-san finish without making a mistake? Yumi thought she must have put on a good display, since Rei-sama had gradually changed from looking completely dejected to leaning forward excitedly.

The koto instruments were carried on to the tatami mats that the judo club had laid out, and the koto music club's concert began. After this, it was the drama club's performance.

Students clad in entrancing kimonos, probably their costumes, were starting to gather behind Yumi. Tōko hadn't yet appeared. Since Tōko and Tsukasa-san were apparently doing a scene with just the two of them, the kimono-clad girls were probably from some other play.

"Oh?"

A student in school uniform weaved her way through the drama club members over to Yumi. It was Shimako-san, who was supposed to be stationed behind the audience seating area.

"I'm here to take your place."

"Huh? But..."

Shimako-san responded before Yumi could ask her about her post.

"I've left it in Noriko's hands."

Then what about the job that Noriko-chan was supposed to be doing? Yoshino-san still hadn't returned. And Tōko was out for now. Shimako-san blew all these concerns away with her next sentence:

"You're to watch from the audience, Yumi-san."

Yumi had no hand to play against someone who could turn over a wildcard with such a serious expression.

"Thank-you. For making this possible."

Yumi bowed, then left her position at the side of the stage. Through the door with the poster on it, out the side exit and into the corridor. The color and monochrome drawings by the manga club that she had seen some time ago were on display in here. Squinting her eyes against the bright lights, Yumi arrived at the photography club's corner. After confirming the presence of the air-conditioning vent, saying, "Ahh, it's really there," and chuckling, Yumi quietly opened the door to the rear of the seating area.

Part 4.

The curtain was lowered immediately after the koto music club's performance ended. Yumi gave Noriko-chan, who was waiting by the door, a look of gratitude, then hunched over and quickly made her way to the second-year seating area.

Yumi sat down on the seat that had been reserved for her and looked up just in time to see Tsukasa-san, microphone in hand, walk out in front of the curtain.

"I thought that, as president of the drama club, I should explain what you're about to see before we start our March performance."

Tsukasa-san was still wearing her school uniform, but it looked as though her hair and makeup were already done – her skin was prepared with dohran and her hair was held in place with several pins.

"For this performance, the drama club split into three groups, so we'll be performing three plays."

Tsukasa-san continued, explaining how they wouldn't be able to perform three plays in their entirety simply based on how long it would take. They'd chosen three scenes from well known plays, that she hoped the audience would enjoy. After making her introduction, Tsukasa-san exited to the side of the stage and the curtain was raised.

There was no set. A solitary kimono-clad girl walked on to the stage from the left. She carried a walking stick, but it didn't appear as though there was anything wrong with her legs. She stopped and wiped the sweat from her brow. Ahh, based on that she was probably on a journey. That would explain why the cuffs on her kimono were a bit higher than normal.

On the right of the stage, another girl leapt forwards. Her kimono was a tad more plain than the first girl's and she jogged across the stage to stop in front of the traveling girl.

“Momoko-san, Momoko-san. Those millet dumplings you have at your waist, won’t you give me one?”

There was scattered laughter around the auditorium. For those audience members who had been watching, trying to figure out what play it was from, this line revealed that it was ‘Momotarou.’

“Okay. I’ll give you one. But you have to join me in my battle against the demons, Inuko-san.”

“I’ll accompany you.”

It seems that this Momoko-san was a lady who knew no fear. She recruited Saruko-san and Kiji-san to join her too, and they were about to head off to the island of the demons.

– Then the curtain fell. Still, since it didn’t look like they were going to have sets, the curtain stayed closed for about ten seconds before being raised again and the next play started. There were two people onstage, dressed like boys. And a number of chairs.

“Campanella.”

One of the characters said, turning to the other. The penny dropped immediately because of the unusual name. It was ‘Night on the Galactic Railroad.’ They had sectioned off the heron catching scene. By omitting the sorrowful finale it left a whimsical, dream-like impression. Despite the joyous nature of the scene, Yumi’s chest tightened when she remembered where Campanella really was at this point.

Tōko still hadn’t made an appearance yet. The final play must be her scene with Tsukasa-san.

The curtain raised for the final time in the drama club’s performance.

The pair were sitting slightly to the right of center-stage. They were both wearing old-fashioned dresses and a bespectacled Tsukasa-san seemed to be cradling Tōko. The only set decoration was a single pole, about a metre tall, to the left of the stage.

Tsukasa-san was manipulating one of Tōko’s hands into various positions, over and over.

“Water, Helen. This is water. W, a, t, e, r.”

Helen. Water.

(It's ‘The Miracle Worker.’)

“Egg. E, g, g. That's its name.”

The Miracle Worker. The miraculous story of Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing as a baby, and her teacher Annie Sullivan. Annie was teaching Helen sign language so that she could lead a somewhat normal life. But while Helen would learn the shapes, as though playing along with a game, she didn't understand what they meant.

Helen had grown up being pampered by her family, so would become violent whenever the mood took her. Annie tolerated none of that. The pair would eventually wear each other out, covered in scratches and bruises.

And then, the famous final scene.

Tsukasa-san dragged Tōko, no, Annie dragged Helen over to the sole piece of scenery. It was the pump. As punishment for intentionally spilling some water, Annie was forcing Helen to draw water from the pump.

“Now, draw the water.”

Helen looked around for her mother to save her.

“No, your mother isn't here. Draw the water!”

Helen lived in darkness. In a silent world. A rough hand guided her to the pump's handle.

(Ah.)

Even though it really was just a simple pole, it seemed as though there was a handle there when Helen reached out for it. The invisible handle went up and down. Then some water came flowing out.

Water spilled from the jug and splashed on Helen's hand. Annie used Helen's hand to spell w, a, t, e, r in sign language.

Then.

A light shone in those eyes that had never seen anything. Her mind's eye opened.

Those lips that had never uttered a single word shook. Not just her lips, it looked like her entire body was shaking. Then she erupted.

“Wah-wah.”

Probing for the water, Helen signed w, a, t, e, r.

Now, she understood. That it was called water.

A brilliant light shone down upon the pair. Then the curtain fell.

The auditorium fell silent as the curtain descended. It was like the world without sound that Helen lived in.

Eventually, when the lights in the auditorium brightened, the audience members came to their senses and remembered to clap, their applause descending like raging billows.

Amongst this endless applause, Yumi rose from her feet and started walking. She sensed the curtain call occurring behind her.

“Yumi-sama...”

It was only when she arrived at the rear door that Yumi remembered Noriko-chan would be there.

“Keep this a secret from Tōko, okay.”

Yumi said, pointing at her tear-stained face.

(Ahh, geeze.)

Yumi had been thinking that she should get back to work now that the drama club's play was over, but she couldn't walk around with her face looking like it did now. Consequently, she had to hide for a little while.

The title of the play was ‘The Miracle Worker.’ Taking it literally, the one who worked the miracle was obviously Annie Sullivan. So it was only right that Annie would come out ahead. Even so.

Yumi chuckled to herself as she opened the bathroom door.

(I've got to hand it to you, Tsukasa-san.)

Yumi was profoundly envious.

(There's no way I could beat that.)
But it was in no way a resentful envy.

Would You Like to Waltz?

Part 1.

They could say it was because of all the tasks they had to complete. Or how they were constantly bombarded by one thing after the other.

But, really, how could they completely forget such an important thing?

Especially me, Yumi thought to herself.

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san were still fine, since they hadn't remembered it at all.

What had been forgotten? The conversation they had to have with Tōko and Noriko-chan about the party performances, of course. Despite Yumi's surprise when she remembered it on the bus this morning, she had then completely forgotten about it, perhaps because her memory playback system had broken down or she simply lacked the ability to learn.

It was embarrassing to blame it on something like the impact of Tōko's hairstyle, or the third-years' send-off completely filling her head.

Anyway, Yumi had totally forgotten about it for the entire morning. It was only just before the second farewell party of the day, the "Farewell Party for Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida" that she foolishly remembered.

While Yumi recognized that telling them about it today would probably be too late, no matter the time, telling them immediately prior to the event would just be too cruel.

The curtain closed on an incredibly successful "Third-years' Send-off." Although it went about 30 minutes overtime, there hadn't been any significant mishaps. Yumi dutifully thanked Maria-sama for seeing them safely through such a large event.

After sitting through their respective homeroom classes, it was time to start preparing for their private farewell party. The two guests-of-honor had agreed to wait in their classroom until called, allowing the first- and second-years to transform the second-floor of the Rose Mansion into a party zone.

There were still a few of the roses bought for the “Third-years’ send-off” remaining even after one had been given to each senior. Shimako-san put these into small vases that she decorated the room with.

Yoshino-san cut the sandwiches that she had bought on the way to school this morning into bite-sized pieces and arranged these on plates that she then put on the table.

Yumi was taking some cookies that had been given to them by the confectionery club out of a tin when she belatedly remembered.

“Ah.”

It was like telepathy. Yoshino-san and Shimako-san stopped what they were doing. Then, before Yumi said anything, they both put their hands over her mouth.

“Erp.”

Luckily, Tōko and Noriko-chan were both over at the sink pouring tea into teacups, so they didn’t see this bizarre behavior from the three second-years.

They knew what she was going to say, so there was no need to make a fuss. After nodding to this message conveyed through Yoshino-san’s eyes, the hands that blocked Yumi’s mouth were removed and she was able to breathe freely.

“What do we do?”

They huddled together and spoke in a whisper. It looked like the thing they had shelved had come crashing down to the ground.

“It’s a bit late to tell them now.”

“But what if we don’t tell them?”

Then they'd have to host the party dreading the moment when the third-years would utter the phrase, 'Party performance.' That wouldn't be good for their hearts.

"But if we do tell them, won't that just mean that the first-years will be nervous during the party."

That was the heart of the problem. But there was no-one there who could solve it.

While they were still having their whispered conversation, Tōko turned towards them, followed by Noriko-chan. Then Tōko said:

"Isn't it about time we got Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida?"

Yumi looked at the clock and saw it was almost 2pm. Even though it was ratcheting up the pressure, they had originally planned for a 1pm start so it had already been a lengthy wait for the two Roses.

"Th, that's right. Can I ask you to do that?"

"I'll go with Tōko. We've already finished preparing the tea."

They continued their conversation after seeing off the first-years.

"Then how about we sneakily tell our onee-samas that there won't be any party performances today."

"Sneakily, you say."

"Even so..."

Right. Since the first-years had gone to fetch the third-years, there wasn't any opening in which they could surreptitiously talk to their onee-samas. And it would look very strange if they were to chase after Tōko and Noriko-chan and order them back to the Rose Mansion so that they could retrieve the third-years themselves.

"If the third-years say so, then there will be a performance."

"I know."

Fundamentally, Lillian's Girls Academy was a school where the juniors obeyed their seniors. If their onee-samas asked for a performance, then they would be expecting someone to do something.

"I'll dance."

Shimako-san stood bolt upright.

“Although I don’t have the cassette with me.”

Yoshino-san asked what she intended to do about that. If there was some suitable music that she could dance to.

“I’ll sing as I dance. It’ll be okay. Sachiko-sama sang as she performed Swan Lake.”

Shimako-san was visibly trembling. The story about Sachiko-sama singing as she performed ballet was just something that her onee-sama, Satō Sei-sama, had made up.

Still, Yumi understood the painful feeling of wanting to spare your darling petite sœur from embarrassment.

“Okay. And I’ll sing as I do the loach scooping dance.”

They started collecting the necessary props – Shimako-san made a basic folding-fan out of paper and Yumi tied some thread around a five-yen coin she found in her purse. She could use a hand-towel in place of a regular towel, but what to do about the strainer? Just as Yumi was wondering whether the basin from the sink would do:

“They’re that precious to you, huh?”

Yoshino-san, who had no petite sœur of her own, looked amazed.

“But without the right props, I can’t do my magic act.”

Nonetheless, Yoshino-san had lined up her handkerchief, a 500 yen note and a safety-pin on the table and was quietly fiddling around with them.

Part 2.

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama arrived at the Rose Mansion right on two o'clock.

The second-years had just hidden their makeshift props in the back of the room, underneath their school coats, when they heard the sound of people climbing the staircase. Just in time.

When they opened the door to greet their guests, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida smiled brilliantly.

"Thank-you for everything you've done for us today."

They both had a salmon-pink rose, with the stalk cut off, pinned to their chest.

"We talked about it on the way over, but we really enjoyed today's third-years' send-off."

"Indeed. Everyone's hard work really paid off."

Yumi had received similar compliments from many third-years today, but when it came from Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama she didn't feel the need to reply with 'Thanks for the compliment.' She was grateful for their praise, but there was something else as well, so she couldn't just respond with that.

These people were the reason why they had worked so hard. The third-years' send-off was for all third-years, so as presenters they obviously wanted to make everyone happy. But setting aside their position as the next Roses, it was these two beloved people that they had thought about as they worked. Surely all the individual members of the various clubs and groups that participated today had some cherished person for whose sake they were working hard. And when you added all that hard work together, what you got was the "Third-years' Send-off."

"Anyway, please take a seat, and have some tea."

As she was saying this, Yumi made a startling realization. They were so busy preparing their props that they had forgotten to place the teacups on the table. She was hastily heading towards the teapot when Tōko said to her:

“Onee-sama, Noriko and I will do that.”

“...Sorry.”

Dejected, Yumi returned to the table and found Rei-sama looking intently in her direction. Yumi looked back, thinking that Rei-sama had something she wanted to say, but Rei-sama just smiled and shook her head. Perhaps Rei-sama was looking for something else.

“Cheers.”

The farewell party started with their standard toast using black tea. At any rate, it was 2pm. The first order of business was satisfying their hunger, so everyone reached for a sandwich or a cookie. The main topic of conversation was, naturally, the third-years’ send-off. They recounted all the things that happened during their preparation. The story of the kind Santa’s presents was incredibly well received.

As they ate, the words started to flow. Their mouths were kept busy.

“Rei-chan?”

Yoshino-san said, her tone asking if anything was wrong. Come to think of it, Rei-sama had been kind of quiet just recently. As though she were daydreaming, or there in body but not in spirit, or searching for something that wasn’t there.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking of everything that’s happened since Christmas.”

Rei-sama smiled as she spoke. So had she been looking at something that had gone away? It didn’t look like she were yearning for the past.

“Christmas, huh?”

Sachiko-sama smiled broadly. There was no mistaking that this was the face of someone reminiscing fondly about the past. A face that said that so much had happened.

“Yeah.”

Yumi nodded.

Back then, Tōko wasn't yet her petite sœur.

Kanako-chan and Nana-chan had been invited, and they'd played games and eaten cake. Right, right, and Tsutako-san had taken a ton of pictures with her camera.

Normally there were eight seats at the table, so they had to bring an additional two over. And they'd chosen where to sit by drawing from a deck of cards.

Now, there were the seven close friends in the room. So there was one chair left over. Rei-sama's gaze was continuously drawn to that empty chair.

Yumi understood.

Rei-sama was undoubtedly looking for Nana-chan.

Part 3.

Time passed, and still the request for a party performance didn't come from the third-years.

They hadn't really wanted to perform, and had prepared the props only as a last resort, but as the party continued without the subject being broached it started to seem as though perhaps it wouldn't come up after all. Even so, Yumi couldn't come up with any better way of wrapping up the farewell party, especially given how much of a hit the party performances had been last year. She was even starting to wonder if perhaps they should be the ones to raise the topic.

“Hey, Yumi.”

Seated beside her, Sachiko-sama spoke quietly.

“I'd completely forgotten about this.”

“Yes?”

Had there been a massive growth in forgetfulness amongst the general population recently? Or was it something that was passed from one person to another, like a cold? Either way, it looked like her onee-sama had caught it.

“What is it?”

Yumi had expected her to smile and say, “The party performances,” but that didn't happen.

“About the amusement park.”

“Oh.”

That was the location for their date tomorrow. Yumi put herself on guard, ready to accept the shocking admission that Sachiko-sama had forgotten about their date, but that didn't happen either.

“I only thought of it recently. When we were talking about Christmas, it came to me.”

“What did?”

“I was wondering if maybe we should all arrange to meet at the amusement park.”

“...Say what?”

Since she’d brought it up, Sachiko-sama obviously wasn’t opposed to the idea. But neither did she want to come out and suggest it as something they should do. Basically, she didn’t want to pressure anyone into it, and wouldn’t be offended if they refused. But since everyone would enjoy the amusement park, Yumi didn’t see anything wrong with being assertive about it. Still, Sachiko-sama seemed bothered by it.

“People. Yumi and I are going to the amusement park tomorrow.”

Everyone was momentarily shocked when Sachiko-sama suddenly stood up and made this announcement. Her cheerfulness made Yumi question her sobriety, and looking around she saw an empty energy drink bottle hidden behind Sachiko-sama’s teacup. The kind Santa’s present. Wow! Her onee-sama was drunk.

“So?”

Rei-sama asked, inquiring as to whether Sachiko-sama was just making an announcement or if there was something more to this story.

“If you’d like, why don’t you come over.”

“Huh?”

“Ahh. It’s not at my house, so asking you to come over does sound a bit strange.”

Sachiko-sama giggled.

“Basically, I was inviting you to come along with us.”

“Hmm?”

In other words, she and Yumi had already arranged to meet, but other people were free to come along if they wanted.

“Okay. So you’re saying that it’s not compulsory, but if we’re all in the same place we could meet up and have some fun.”

Rei-sama seemed to understand.

“Is that okay, Yumi-san?”

Yoshino-san nudged her arm. Asking if it was supposed to be a date for just the two of them.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Either way, it was never going to be just the two of them. Four, six, eight, it’s all the same. The more the merrier, probably.

Pa-n pan pa-n!

At the same time as this explosive sound, the biscuit door opened. No, wait, the biscuit door opened and then there was the sound.

Looking around, Tōko and Noriko-chan were standing there, smiling, and holding the spent firecrackers.

Yumi had completely missed their early departure. They walked into the room carrying some baggage. Tōko was carrying her overnight bag and it looked like it had regained its original bulk.

“Oooh, what’s happening?”

Sachiko-sama turned to Yumi and Rei-sama turned to Yoshino-san to ask, but they were both met with shrugs. Of course, Shimako-san didn’t know what the first-years were doing, either.

“It’s showtime!”

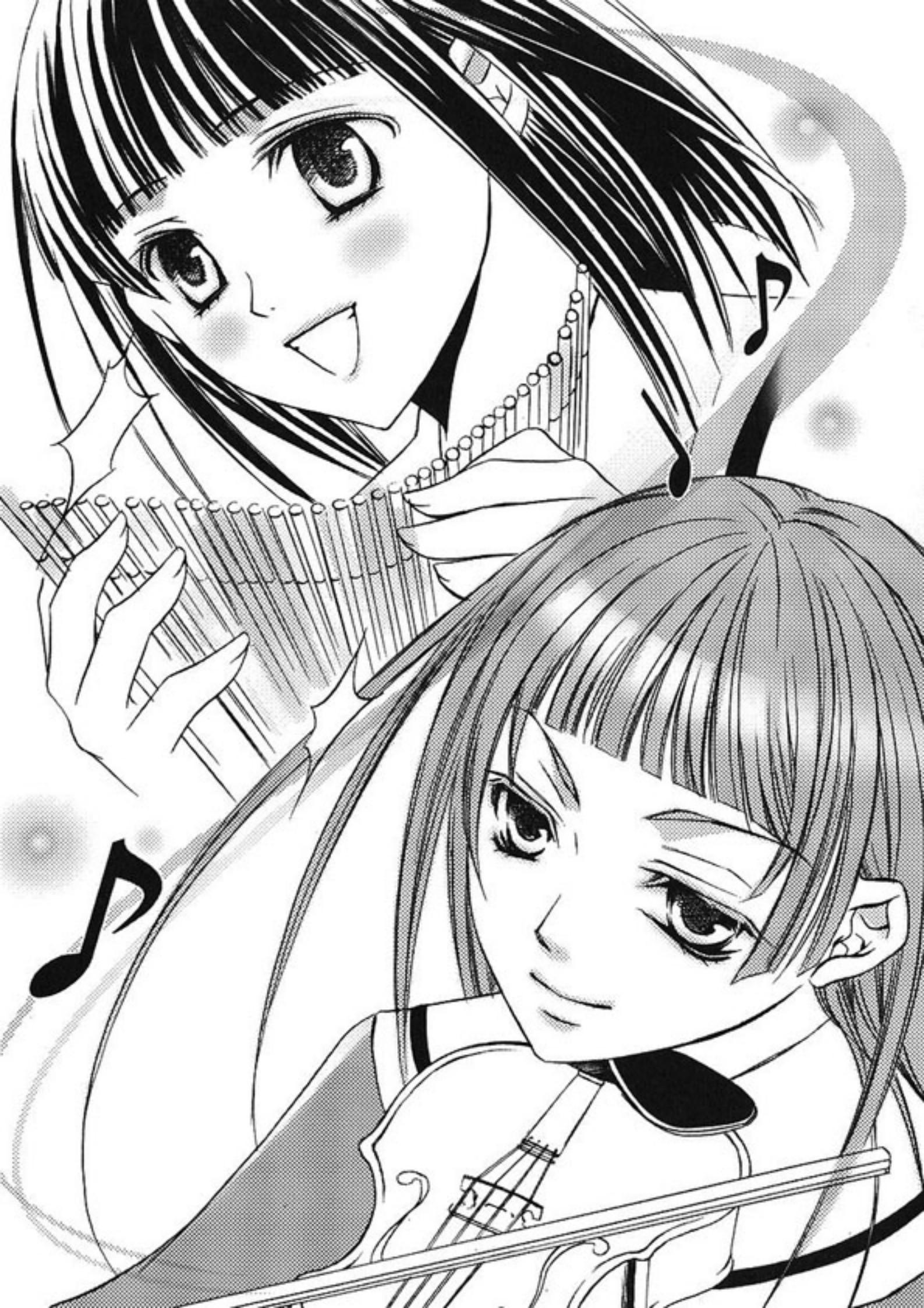
Noriko-chan called out. Tōko opened her bag and pulled something out. Yumi knew that shape. It was a violin case.

Tōko took the violin out and started playing a light melody. Then Noriko-chan took something from her purse that looked like a bunch of decorative chopsticks. Yumi knew what this was too. It was –

“Well then, time for the Nankin Tamasudare show!”

– that.

Showtime continued, oblivious to the bewilderment of the second-years. That nostalgic carnival melody was the musical accompaniment to the Nankin Tamasudare performance. It looked like they’d put a lot of effort into this. Everyone turned their chairs to face the performing duo.



Noriko-chan used her Nankin Tamasudare screen to make the gates to Lillian's Girls Academy, Buddha's halo, Napoleon's hat, and a number of other things, one after the other.

"I guess we won't be needing our props."

"Yep."

The three second-years nodded, watching as Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama applauded raucously.

"Even so..."

Just when, where and how did Tōko and Noriko-chan think of doing this?

"Hehehe."

Yumi laughed spontaneously. The first-year super combination were attentive to details, even on things they didn't have to worry about, and ever so reliable.

"Are there any requests?"

Tōko asked, tuning her violin. It looked like Noriko-chan's Nankin Tamasudare performance had ended.

"Well then, 'Maria-sama's soul,' please."

Sachiko-sama said, rising from her chair.

"Okay."

When Tōko raised her violin, Sachiko-sama took hold of Yumi's left hand. Gripped by her right hand, their bodies drew close. Yumi's body responded before she had time to think about it.

It was in 6/8 time, but you could dance to it in 3/4 time.

One, two, three, two, two, three.

The waltz steps. Natural spin turn.

Yumi remembered this from her first-year cultural festival. The ballroom scene from Cinderella.

They had danced together, on the night of the cultural festival. Just after they had become grande sœur and petite sœur. In front of the statue of Maria-sama. To the distant sound of students singing.

How quickly time had flown since then.

When she'd received that rosary, she hadn't been looking to the future. The year-and-a-half until her onee-sama's graduation had seemed like an eternity.

There had been days when she had obsessed over what would happen if her onee-sama left her.

Nonetheless, they were here now.

Even though it was her onee-sama's farewell party, Yumi was able to face it without crying.

One, two, three, two, two, three.

In time with the melody played by Tōko.

Lured in by her onee-sama's laughter.

Yoshino-san took Rei-sama's hand and joined them in dancing. Shimako-san took a reluctant Noriko-chan's hand.

It'll be alright, even if you can't dance. Just press your bodies together and sway to the music.

See, who knew dancing could be this much fun?

Tōko-chan continued to play, starting from the top again.

One, two, three, two, two, three.

Even though she knew the end would come at some point.

Surrounded by her dear friends.

Yumi wished they could have stayed dancing like this forever.

Afterword

Ah, another rose...!

“Maria-sama ga Miteru: Crown of Roses.”

I’ve used rose again. It’s the third such title, after “Yellow Rose Revolution” and “Rose Mille-Feuille.” However, if you don’t just look at the cover, but also at the chapter subtitles then it’s used quite a bit. Like in “Yellow Rose – ,” “Rosa Chinensis’ best day of her life,” “Rose Dialogue,” etc. It seems like there’s endless combinations of them.

I think a large part of this is because the characters are called Roses. The pattern whereby “Rose” is used as a synonym for the character. For instance, it’s possible to replace “Rosa Chinensis’ best day of her life” with “Mizuno Yōko’s best day of her life” and “Rose Dialogue” could be changed to “Sachiko and Rei’s Dialogue.”

However, the “Rose” in this book’s title, “Crown of Roses,” isn’t identifying anyone. It purely relates to the flower.

So what the heck is the crown of roses then? (Although I’m sure a lot of you already know.) It’s the rosary. The rosary used to offer prayers to the Virgin Mary has the connotation of a “Rose Loop” or a “Garland of Roses.”

Therefore, this book’s title could simply be “Rosary.” Chosen as the symbol of the ties that bind Sachiko to Yumi, and Yumi to Tōko. At Lillian’s Girls Academy, a rosary is ceremonially placed around the younger student’s neck when two students become sœurs. However, Catholics generally don’t wear a rosary around their neck. They hold it, and move their position as they say each prayer. (Similar to how the juzu is used in Buddhism.)

Speaking of Roses.

Occasionally I’ll get asked, “Why are they called Roses if they’re on the Yamayurikai (Golden-rayed Lily council)?” That’s probably because the floral image I have of Maria-sama is both as a rose and a lily, so I wasn’t able to choose just one.

Thinking back, umm, a few decades. When I was in kindergarten, I had a picture showing a group of lovely women (they may have been angels, I only have a faint recollection of this) offering a crown of roses to Maria-sama, from memory just after the conception of Jesus.

In other words, a painting of the famous annunciation. The white lily was a symbol of purity, and was often drawn alongside archangel Gabriel. They seemed to match.

Well, back to the present. It's been a while, but I've got another everyday story.

In summer this year, there were some little geckos that would appear in my room. They were about the size of dried sardines, or perhaps baby dried sardines. If you include the tail then they were a bit longer, but that was about the width, the impression they gave. They were closer to black than gray – if I was being fashionable I'd say it was charcoal gray – their appearance were incredibly lovely.

Still, I wondered where they could have come from. It didn't seem like they could have teleported there. There were three of them for about two weeks. And only in my room.

– Two wins, one loss.

Of what, you ask. Two safely escaped outside while one died. I saw it one morning, but then I lost it. After that it was unaccounted for, but when I found it four days later it had expired. I don't know its cause of death, perhaps heatstroke (at that time it was hot every day, with no water) or perhaps an accident. I gave it some thought, but couldn't come to a conclusion. Still, the shock I felt when I saw the body falling from the curtain that I'd just moved gave me pause to consider. I buried the remains in a grave I dug in my garden and said a prayer for its happiness in the next life (either Buddhist or Christian).

Anyway. There are still a number of unresolved matters from this story. They can wait until the next volume. It may be a presumption of importance, and it's not a quiz, but when you hear the answer you might go, "Oh, really?" An equally valid opinion would be that in that case I shouldn't put it off. Still, it's quite drawn out. I'll answer that like Shimako.

"The answer is within the amusement park date in the next volume of Maria-sama ga Miteru. Teeheehee. It'll be interesting."

– It's no good. Like Yumi, I could only manage a forced laugh when attempting to imitate Shimako.

Disperse before I creep you out.